



AFFECTIVE
MEDITATION
and the
INVENTION of
MEDIEVAL
COMPASSION

Sarah McNamer

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Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion



Sarah McNamer

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For V. A. Kolve

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Intimate Scripts in the History of Emotion

AT THE CENTER OF medieval Christian culture, there was a human figure—male, once beautiful, dying on a cross. This book is about the feelings elicited toward that suffering figure through one of the most popular and influential literary genres of the high and later Middle Ages: affective meditations on the Passion—richly emotional, script-like texts that ask their readers to imagine themselves present at scenes of Christ’s suffering and to perform compassion for that suffering victim in a private drama of the heart.¹ The first texts of this kind emerged in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries as short Latin prayers and meditations. Over the next three centuries, this literature continued to develop in richness and variety, particularly in the vernaculars, including Middle English, my special focus here. In formal terms, such writing is remarkably flexible and capacious. It encompasses prose meditations on the life of Christ in which the narrator leads the reader through the events of the Passion, punctuating graphic descriptions of Christ’s sufferings with injunctions to feel: “Beholde him with sorowe of herte.”² It includes Passion lyrics that script sorrowful sighs for the reader to perform:

I syke when y singe
for sorewe that y se
when y with wypinge
biholde vpon the tre
ant se Iesu the suete
is herte blod forlete
for the loue of me³

It includes poems that strive to move the reader through appeals of Christ from the cross and alliterative prose rhapsodies that evoke affective response through driving rhythms and exclamatory rhetoric: “Ah! that lovely body, that hangs so pitifully, so bloody and so cold.”⁴ And it encompasses the *planctus Mariae*, prose and verse laments that seek to elicit compassion not only through their intense evocation of maternal sorrow but also through the Virgin’s direct invitations to share her suffering: “Be-holde my childe, be-holde now me / ffor now liggus ded my dere son, dere.”⁵ Though a good number of these writings possess an enduring beauty and emotive power, many may strike the modern reader as overwrought or sentimental—as

lacking in the kind of restraint or decorum that would make them appealing on purely aesthetic grounds. But to evaluate them on these grounds would be to mistake their fundamental character and significance. They were not crafted primarily to be admired—even by God—as aesthetic artifacts. They had serious, practical work to do: to teach their readers, through iterative affective performance, how to feel.

It is for this reason that the wide range of works I consider part of this literature played such an important role in the broad historical change that has been called “one of the greatest revolutions in feeling that Europe has ever witnessed”: the rise of compassionate devotion to the suffering Christ.⁶ The broad outlines of this shift in sensibility are well known. Christ, of course, was not always represented as suffering victim. Images of the crucifixion in devotional literature and art before the eleventh century typically depict Christ as triumphant savior: even on the cross, he is regal in bearing, clothed and crowned, victorious over death, awe-inspiring. But by the thirteenth century, a different image has begun to dominate, and it will do so until the Reformation: naked and disfigured, covered with blood, Christ has become a vulnerable human victim, one for whom the meditator could and should feel compassion.

Such a significant cultural shift has not lacked scholarly attention, and this study is informed by much rich and innovative work in a wide variety of fields, including the history of spirituality, cultural studies, literary criticism, and art history. But a new conceptual framework has emerged that has not yet been brought to bear on this historical change and the devotional genre so instrumental in generating and sustaining it: the history of emotion.

This book’s first commitment is to articulating a history of affective meditation as a literary kind; its participation in what is now a well-established tradition of scholarship on gender and the history of devotion—scholarship inspired largely by the work of Caroline Bynum—will also be obvious. But by drawing on the history of emotion as an additional framework, this book presents a new reading of medieval Christian compassion as a historically contingent, ideologically charged, and performatively constituted emotion—and one that was, in the broad period considered here (ca. 1050–1530), insistently gendered as feminine. This book’s conclusions about the origins of affective meditation, the operative rules of the genre, and the social and political functions of these texts circle around a core configuration: to perform compassion—in the private drama of the heart that these texts stage—is to feel like a woman, in particular medieval iterations of that identity. Perceptions that there are special links between women and compassion are, of course, quite common, and by no means confined to the medieval period; indeed, because of their pervasiveness they have often been taken to be natural, precultural, or ahistorical. One claim this book makes is simply that culture participates in

forging and nourishing these links—and that it is possible to glimpse some of the mechanisms of the persistent invention and reinvention of compassion as a womanly emotion by attending to particular texts and their uses in a particular span of time.

The specific and varied conversations in which this study participates are discussed in individual chapters, whose arguments are sketched below. Rather than providing a comprehensive overview of the eclectic methods employed in this book, this introduction will briefly address three issues as they inform this study: the value of the history of emotion as a conceptual rubric, even—indeed especially—where a religious genre is concerned; the cultural variability of what I am calling here “compassion”; and the relation between this genre and concepts of performativity.

COMPASSION IN THE HISTORY OF EMOTION

That emotions have histories—varying in structure from one culture, community, or period to the next and serving diverse social functions—is one of the chief insights of contemporary interdisciplinary scholarship. Influenced in part by cross-cultural anthropological studies, cultural historians have produced compelling accounts of the historicity of emotions, tracing not only the contours of particular emotions and the cultural work they perform in specific contexts, but varying models of emotional production itself.⁷ Yet historical investigations of compassion have not fared especially well even under these circumstances; with the exception of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sentimentalism, it remains largely true—as Karl Morrison observed twenty years ago—that “the history of compassion is yet to be written.”⁸ Even the landmark studies of affective devotion by Caroline Bynum, Jeffrey Hamburger, Sarah Beckwith, Thomas Bestul, and Rachel Fulton do not explicitly advance the “history of compassion” as their central subject.⁹

Why not? In part, this may be because the term has an antiquated or distasteful resonance in contemporary academic culture. Unlike the related subject of violence, for instance, and unlike a wide range of other emotions, this term—even more than kindred terms (pity, empathy, sympathy)—carries with it an array of associations that appear to place it above, beyond, or beneath the array of subjects suitable for rigorous critical investigation. Compassion is strongly associated with religious virtue, with the maternal, with indiscriminate feeling, with alternative spiritualities, with what is soft, apolitical, simple. But as Lauren Berlant has put it, “there is nothing simple about compassion apart from the desire for it to be taken as simple, as a true expression of human attachment and recognition.”¹⁰ Indeed, if Martha Nussbaum is right in claiming that compassion is “the basic social emotion,” there is much to be gained by tracing its structural features and complex workings in various cultural contexts, including how they are made to seem

too simple for complex analysis.¹¹ The task of establishing what Berlant has called “archives of compassion” is thus of more than antiquarian interest.¹²

This project seeks to contribute to that archive in part through an act of reframing. For a second reason why the “history of compassion is yet to be written” has to do with categorization. The meditative literature I consider here is typically placed within the master category of religion and thus not fully recognized as a set of cultural artifacts that might be aligned with other aspects of cultural history. Yet the Passion, as medieval culture’s most potent and pervasive story, clearly functioned as a site of significant cultural work. There is, to be sure, a substantial body of scholarship in medieval literary and cultural studies that has, since the early 1990s, recognized this—so much so that Middle English devotional literature, for instance, is now routinely recognized as serving powerful extra-devotional functions, including generating subjectivities and legitimating certain forms of violence.¹³ Yet the rubric of religion continues to govern the way emotion is treated, even in this body of scholarship. Thus, even studies that do indeed expose historically specific cognitive or social aspects of compassion for Christ in the later Middle Ages do not present themselves as histories of emotion or draw on the methodological tools deployed by those openly working in this field.

One dramatic consequence of this is that studies of devotion to the Passion are not recognized as studies of historical emotion. The abundant scholarship on affective piety—and indeed the entire historical phenomenon of compassion for Christ in the Middle Ages—is regularly ignored in important studies that seek to sketch the broad outlines of compassion in the West. Nussbaum’s chapters on compassion in her magisterial *Upheavals of Thought* give the impression that compassion was of little interest in the Middle Ages; her philosophical investigation of the “cognitive structure of compassion” suggests that this emotion has a very vibrant life in ancient Greek literature and thought and then disappears, only to be revived again by Hume in the eighteenth century.¹⁴ Even scholars whose self-described homes are history or cultural history regularly do not see Christian compassion in the Middle Ages as a phenomenon that belongs or ought to belong to the history of emotion. Barbara Rosenwein, for instance, in her influential 2003 article on the history of emotion as it relates to medieval studies, makes no mention of the assiduous cultivation of compassion in late-medieval devotion or of the copious scholarship on affective piety: compassion is simply not on the map, even in work that explicitly seeks to map the past and future of the history of emotion in the Middle Ages.¹⁵

This problem of the recurrent absorption of emotion by the rubric of religion and its consequent invisibility or presumed unavailability to the history of emotion as such is not unique to studies of compassion in medieval Christianity; indeed, as John Corrigan has recently observed, it is pervasive. Corrigan captures the paradox well. There is from one point of

view abundant scholarship on emotion in the fields of theology and religious studies (Corrigan himself, with others, published a 1,258-item bibliography on the theme in 2000).¹⁶ Yet it can still be said that “the academic study of religion has avoided engaging that theme,” for emotion in religious contexts has rarely been subjected to the kind of rigorous critical analysis that it has received in other contexts.¹⁷ In Corrigan’s view, what drives this deference to religion as the dominant explanatory rubric is in large part fear of the charge of “reductionism.” Scholars whose disciplinary homes are religious studies or theology are particularly vulnerable to this charge. Even for those working in other disciplines, however, there has been another formidable obstacle to isolating emotion as a distinct category of analysis. That obstacle is the dominance of theological discourse itself. Since Corrigan’s comments have such a direct bearing on the subject of this study, they are worth quoting at length:

Perhaps it is the centuries-long intertwining of language about religion and emotion in theological writing that has framed the current state of religious studies scholarship in which emotion is not explored as vigorously as in related disciplines. Scholars who might seek to disembody the discussion of religion and emotion from that theologically flavored discourse accordingly must confront the long, imposing, and seemingly overwhelming history of Western theological investigation. Such a prospect is daunting. And the fact is that until recently most scholars, influenced by theological discourses about emotion, have taken emotion for granted as a category of analysis. Scholarly expositions of religions have tended to appeal to emotion as if it were a universal, rich in explanatory power, a common denominator of experience bridging the widely varying contexts of lived traditions. From such a starting point, historical researchers have distinguished among religious groups by remarking that one was “more emotional” than the other. Philosophers and theologians have arranged analyses of religious ideas around poles of “emotion” and “reason.” And psychologists have fashioned reports about the extent to which persons were “emotionally fulfilled” or challenged through their practice of the religious life. But what is meant by “emotion”? And how to account for most writers’ inattention to the nature of emotion itself?¹⁸

Far from leading to “reductionism,” Corrigan argues, work that participates in current debates about emotion across the disciplines has tremendous potential to illuminate the sentiments present in religious contexts, sentiments that are too often placed above or beyond culture and history.

This study seeks to open up new avenues of investigation by setting theology to one side as the ultimate explanation for why and how the dominant emotional regime of medieval Christianity changed.¹⁹ By

considering the history of devotion as an aspect of the history of emotion rather than the other way around, this study offers a new narrative for a familiar cultural transformation. It proposes that the history of this affective mode is intimately intertwined with gender history. It suggests—contrary to a long history of scholarship—that compassionate meditation originated as a practice among female religious. Writers such as John of Fécamp and Anselm have typically been said to have invented this affective mode, but I argue that they were seeking to serve the stated or assumed needs of women who, for reasons having less to do with theology than with the very worldly reality of changing conceptions of marriage, sought to enact legal marriages to Christ through iterative affective performance. When affective meditation was taken up by male monastics such as Bernard of Clairvaux, and later by the Franciscans, it continued to carry within it a gendered logic: to feel compassion is to feel like a woman. Because contemporary scholarship continues to deploy patriarchal genealogies to name this genre (it is often called Anselmian, Bernardine, or Franciscan), the way it configures the emotion of compassion itself along gendered lines has not been sufficiently registered. Recognizing that gender performance became an enduring, core mechanism for the production of this emotion not only helps to explain the historically specific social and ethical functions of compassion in late medieval England; it also helps expose emotion-driven fractures within so-called traditional religion—especially in the meditative practices of powerful lay men—at the cusp of the Reformation.

THE CULTURAL VARIABILITY OF COMPASSION

The story I tell here participates in an ongoing debate in contemporary emotions research, one that asks whether or how any feeling can be said to be “invented.” There is a significant body of work that holds that emotions—particularly so-called basic emotions—are precultural, prelinguistic, innate. Darwin’s articulation of this position in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* continues to be refined and developed by such psychologists as Paul Ekman.²⁰ At the other extreme, emotions are said to be social or linguistic products. Anthropologist Catherine Lutz argues that “emotional experience is not precultural, but preeminently cultural.”²¹ Studies in the latter camp are often expressly indebted to Foucault, who puts the matter simply: “We believe that feelings are immutable, but every sentiment, particularly the noblest and most disinterested, has a history.”²² By “history,” Foucault is not positing a variable cultural gloss on a natural, ahistorical given. This history runs deep: emotions, as products of discourse, are “the place in which the most minute and local social practices are linked up with the large scale organization of power.”²³ While this study does not undertake a thorough-going Foucauldian analysis, it does seek to contribute to a growing body of work that attempts to analyze emotions as habits that can

be produced through cultural scripts and come to be experienced as second nature.²⁴

Because compassion in the texts and contexts I examine typically absorbs gender into its inner structure, and because compassion is often considered a feminine emotion in the contemporary West, it is important to emphasize at the outset that compassion is not always and everywhere structured along a gendered axis or practiced especially by women. Two contemporary non-Western analogues to compassion—Ifaluk *fago* and Tibetan Buddhist *tsewa*—illustrate this clearly, as does the case of pity (*eleos* or *oiktos*) in ancient Greece. Each of these analogues is worth attending to in some detail, for they illuminate through contrast the cultural specificity of the medieval form of compassion I consider in this book as well as post-medieval Western iterations of feminized compassion.

Lutz translates the Ifaluk emotion of *fago* as “compassion/love/sadness.”²⁵ It is an emotion triggered by the perception of need in others, and its prominence and pervasiveness among the Ifaluk is due, as Lutz sees it, to the “precariousness of life” on a Micronesian atoll, where illness and early death are common and visible.²⁶ Lutz observes that the “parent-child relationship is, along with that between sisters and brothers, the one most frequently understood with the concept of *fago*.”²⁷ Nurturance is the primary way of showing *fago* in practice, but nurturance is not linked chiefly to mothers or to sisters; fathers and brothers also nurture children and the needy. Indeed the most powerful men in this remarkably non-hierarchical society, the chiefs, are seen as particularly worthy of this title to the extent that they feel and demonstrate *fago*, for this emotion is not only “at the core of the cultural definition of maturity on Ifaluk” and productive of gentleness (the trait most admired in men or women) but a sign that a person is powerful enough to fulfill another’s need.²⁸ Because the dying and recently deceased are objects of *fago*, grief is folded into the emotional concept. At a scene of death, Lutz observed no gendered differences: “Both men and women spent tears in what seemed to me equal measure,” and in the “careful choreography of grief” at the house of the deceased, she observed no distinction between men and women.²⁹ A further point of contrast between *fago* and the feminization of Western compassion in the medieval texts and contexts I trace is the foreignness of any romantic element in *fago*. Love is certainly conflated with compassion in the Ifaluk context, but it is love between parents and child or between siblings. An emotion akin to Western romantic love (*baiu*) is evident among the Ifaluk, but *fago* has virtually no place in this construct.³⁰

The Tibetan Buddhist concept of *tsewa* provides another contrast to gendered Western constructs of compassion. As Richard Davidson and Anne Harrington have put it in a recent collection of essays, “Tibetan Buddhism has long celebrated the human potential for compassion.”³¹ Their volume includes transcriptions of dialogues conducted between Western academics and the Dalai Lama. In one of these, Harrington, noting the “stereotypical

female” quality of compassion in the contemporary West, puts the question of gender differences in capacity for compassionate feeling directly to the Dalai Lama, who replies: “According to Buddhist psychology, there can’t be any fundamental difference.”³² *Tsewa* is the “state of wishing that the object of your compassion be free of suffering.”³³ While Harrington notes that “Buddhism speaks a great deal about the mother as the ultimate image of the compassionate being,” the detailed descriptions of the cultivation of compassion through Buddhist meditation do not draw on maternal images or invite the meditator to imagine the self as mother.³⁴ Indeed, attachment itself is a feeling that should be overcome in the kind of compassion that the adept seek to practice; *tsewa* is ideally experienced “with equanimity and a lack of attachment.”³⁵ Sadness, pain, attachment, and distress are not only inessential components of *tsewa*; the absence of these components has suggested to researchers that this emotion produces feelings of well-being that align it with other “positive” emotions—positive in the sense that it is pleasurable and conducive to physical, as well as mental, health. Davidson, who is a neurologist, has shown that Tibetan monks adept at the practice of Buddhist meditation, a practice defined by the goal of cultivating *tsewa*, develop neural pathways that show a heightened activation of the left prefrontal cortex, a region of the brain generally associated with pleasurable and positive feelings.³⁶

In ancient Greece, gender is not a fundamental structuring principle of *eleos* and *oiktos*, the terms translated by Martha Nussbaum as “compassion” and by David Konstan as “pity.”³⁷ According to Nussbaum, there are three constitutive features of *eleos* or *oiktos* in ancient Greek thought: the misfortune suffered has “size” or seriousness; it is not deserved; and it generates in the observer an awareness that he or she could suffer a similar misfortune.³⁸ While Nussbaum seeks to show that these constitutive features apply in other historical contexts, Konstan investigates the structure and functions of Greek pity as a culturally contingent artifact. Konstan uncovers a rich array of evidence that reveals how closely this emotion is linked to class status in particular. Gender, in contrast, is absent as a category of analysis in Konstan’s work; it appears that gender was simply not a significant factor in the construction of pity in ancient Greece.³⁹

As Konstan observes, there is another set of ancient Greek terms beginning with the prefix *sun-* (*sunalgein*, *sullupeisthai*, and variants), and these are sometimes aligned with images of the maternal.⁴⁰ But the forms of identification with another’s suffering suggested by these terms do not, according to Konstan’s analysis, have feminized, eroticized, or nuptial components, as they do in the medieval affective meditations we will explore. The good wife or female lover is not defined by her ability to suffer with her husband or lover. This is undoubtedly related to the relative lack of value attached to heterosexual love in ancient Greece. Konstan emphasizes the foreignness of intimate love to Aristotle’s definition of pity. “Aristotle

does not discuss pity anywhere in his treatment of *philia*, since it does not pertain, in his view, to those who are very close, whether friends or kin. For Greek (and Roman) pity, as I have been arguing, involves a distance between the pitier and the pitied. To put it aphoristically, pity begins where love leaves off.”⁴¹ Greek pity is quite far from the medieval form of compassion I examine, which is often predicated on intimate love of two particular kinds: the love of a mother for her son and of a female spouse for her beloved.

Ifaluk, Tibetan Buddhist, and Greek iterations of compassion not only expose compassion as a highly contingent and culturally constructed form of response to the suffering of another; they also demonstrate that one of the most “obvious” aspects of this emotion in the contemporary West—its association with women—is not inevitable. The fact that there is such cultural variability in the constitutive features of this emotion raises, too, an important question: can these variations even be considered iterations of the same emotion? Does “compassion” have an irreducible essence?⁴² These are not questions I will attempt to answer here; pursuing them would lead far beyond my own disciplinary competence and beyond the temporal and generic boundaries of this study. But they do raise the issue of how I am defining *compassion*.

I am using this term with a strategic, umbrella-like utility—for, as a term, I believe it cannot be defined any more precisely than what its Latin etymology (*com* + *patior*) suggests: “suffering with.” To distinguish compassion sharply from other terms, especially the Latin and vernacular terms for pity, would not be true to the sources, for often pity and compassion are used interchangeably. Moreover, in Middle English usage, *compassioun*, *reuthe*, and *sorwe* frequently function as near synonyms.⁴³ Hard and fast linguistic distinctions do not always apply, and for this reason I adopt a flexible stance in which I use *compassion* as a loose and provisional term. In taking this approach to what can be a very vexed question, I follow the lead of researchers who, even as they have investigated particular emotions, have cautioned that emotion terms are inevitably vague—and thus that such terms are best understood as imprecise designations for a cluster of mental and somatic events exhibiting family resemblances.⁴⁴

But to describe this emotion a bit more fully, medieval compassion, as developed in and through the genre I investigate, is intimate (ideally, dyadic) in structure; it is not easily described as “altruistic,” for it can be intensely selfinterested; it does not often assume that the other’s suffering ought to be prevented (indeed, this is why the late Middle English laments of the Virgin, which depart from this structure, are so striking); it is conflated with love, gratitude, guilt, and grief.⁴⁵ But the trait most evident in the various iterations I explore is its insistent feminization. Because compassion is often aligned with the feminine in contemporary Western culture, its feminization in the context of medieval Christian meditation has too easily been overlooked as a made and historically contingent thing, a cultural construct

as deserving of close scrutiny as the more manifestly odd or arresting shapes that emotion has taken in history.

AFFECTIVE MEDITATIONS AS INTIMATE SCRIPTS

Performance is another guiding rubric in this study. From one point of view, this is to be expected in any investigation of the social construction of emotion: the concept of “emotion scripts” has become fundamental to work in psychology, cultural studies, anthropology, and the history of emotion.⁴⁶ This term has come to stand for the loosely affiliated cultural prescripts that aid in establishing and maintaining what cultural historians have termed “emotional regimes” or “emotional communities.”⁴⁷ Recent work in medieval history has further recognized the affective performativity of ritual formulae, particularly in the context of feuding and reconciliation.⁴⁸ But on the whole, the term *script* has been used as a metaphor for general social forces or as a synonym for discourse.⁴⁹

I take a more literal approach, one invited by the character of affective meditations themselves. These are, I suggest, “intimate scripts”: they are quite literally scripts for the performance of feeling—scripts that often explicitly aspire to performative efficacy. Many are scripted as first-person, present-tense utterances, designed to be enacted by the reader. Others work through interpellation, hailing the reader as “you” and directing affective response, even prescribing the gestures that will generate compassion (“behold him,” “embrace him”). Still others stage detailed, vividly imagined scenes from the Passion and cast the reader as feeling eyewitness and participant. The participatory, performative character of these texts is often enhanced through the use of apostrophes and exclamations, deictic rhetoric (“here,” “there”), and the regular use of the dramatic present.

As mechanisms for the production of emotion, many of the texts belonging to this genre can be categorized as iterations of what William Reddy has called “emotives.” Reddy defines this concept most fully in *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotion*. Emotives, Reddy explains, are “firstperson, present tense emotion claims” that potentially, but not always, function as performatives; they are “similar to performatives (and differ from constatives) in that emotives do things to the world. Emotives are themselves instruments for directly changing, building, hiding, intensifying emotions, instruments that may be more or less successful.”⁵⁰ This concept is especially useful for the bridge it constructs between literature and history. Reddy himself, for example, makes the bold argument that emotives in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French literature were instrumental in producing the French Revolution and its aftermath.

As emotives, the intimate scripts I investigate also bear witness to a medieval concept of emotional production that differs from what Rosenwein

has called the “hydraulic” model reflexively assumed in early studies of medieval emotion—a model in which emotions are assumed to be already present in the self and either pent up or released.⁵¹ Rosenwein herself does not propose that a performative model of emotional production is the norm for the Middle Ages. But this study contributes to a body of empirical work that is building a case for a performative model of affect as the default mode for this period.⁵² The theory of the passions that becomes so prominent in the early modern period has often been extrapolated to explain emotion in the medieval period as well. While Galenic humoral theory and other explanations grounded in physical “realities” (physiology, astrology, demons) certainly circulated in the Middle Ages, their status as the dominant medieval grounding for emotion is becoming far less clear. The presumed dominance of medical theory in the Middle Ages—that is, the dominance of the view that bodily realities precede any expression of those realities rather than the idea that performing a state of mind might create that state of mind—could well be an effect of the rhetoric of medical theory itself, which is often supremely confident of its assertions. This tendency can even be seen up to the present day. In neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux’s *The Emotional Brain*, for instance, little room is left for the possibility that emotions can be produced through performance. LeDoux asserts that emotion cannot be, in his words, faked: “Anyone who has tried to fake an emotion, or who has been the recipient of a faked one, knows all too well the futility of the attempt.”⁵³ This claim is embedded in an even broader assertion: “Emotions are things that happen to us rather than things we will to occur.”⁵⁴ But the genre I investigate here provides counterevidence from cultural rather than biological data. It assumes that emotions can indeed be willed, faked, performed through the repetition of scripted words.⁵⁵ It is through such manifest fakery, this genre insists, that compassion can be brought into being, can come to be “true.”

The same process, moreover, is often implicitly or explicitly understood in the medieval context to produce gender. To perform compassion through enacting these scripts is often to perform gender in the performative sense articulated by Judith Butler.⁵⁶ This is not to say that medieval compassion was always and everywhere constructed as an emotion that defined its subject as womanly; what this study exposes is a very strong and recurrent *tendency* for this to be the case. Affective meditations on the Passion can thus be seen as a culturally specific technology for producing the conjunctions of affect and gender that have been defined more broadly by Stephanie Shields. As Shields observes, both gender and emotion are “accomplishments” that are always ongoing, ever in process. Just as emotion is accomplished intersubjectively, so too is gender: gendered emotion then “is not a feature of an achieved gender role, but an always in-progress negotiation of gender practice.”⁵⁷

It would be far more astonishing, of course, to show that compassion

was typically gendered masculine in the Middle Ages, or assigned a third gender that has now disappeared, or not gendered at all. Such conclusions would be, in a word, “wonderful”—suggesting, through the surprise they might generate and through their manifest alterity, that they might make for better history. Wonder itself, in fact, has been posited by Caroline Bynum to be a trustworthy emotional guide in the quest of contemporary scholars to see and describe past worlds accurately.⁵⁸ Bynum cites with great approval the slogan popularized by the Paris radicals of 1968: “Every view of things that is not strange is false.”⁵⁹ And there is no doubt that by searching for what is surprising and radically “other,” Bynum has uncovered fascinating truths about the Middle Ages and about devotion to the suffering Christ in particular.⁶⁰

Yet I would suggest that historical realities are not always joined to what is arresting, particularly where gender is concerned. By eschewing as inevitably false—or even worse, as boring—whatever is similar rather than different across the *longue durée*, we risk missing out on discovering where another kind of wondering might lead. How did “normal” get to be so? And why has it endured as “normal” for so long? The enduring link between women and compassion in the West since the Middle Ages merits consideration within this more mundane framework. For, with Pierre Bourdieu, I see the obvious as precisely what most needs explaining about culture.⁶¹ My aim is thus to expose some of the mechanisms of the invention of compassion as a feminine emotion, through a close examination of particular texts, practices, and institutions in a specific historical period. At its broadest, this study participates in returning to history those deeply ingrained cultural prescripts that continue perennially to be abstracted from historical processes.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

This book consists of two parts. The first considers Latin, Italian, and early Middle English texts typically characterized as “Anselmian” or “Franciscan” in order to present an extended argument about the origins of affective meditation on the Passion (ca. 1050–1350). The second part focuses on how later Middle English texts—from Marian and other lyrics to the prose meditations of Richard Rolle and Nicholas Love—function as scripts for the performance of compassion in late medieval England (1350–1530).

The narrative begins *in medias res*. [Chapter 1](#) advances a new framework for understanding why women engaged in affective devotion with special fervor and frequency, a tendency that becomes especially visible in the thirteenth century. At present, the explanation advanced by Bynum in the 1980s, most amply in her groundbreaking *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, continues to serve as the dominant paradigm for studies of gender and late medieval devotion to the Passion. Bynum’s chief method has been to ask

probing and precise questions about the meanings of cultural symbols. Simply put, Bynum's argument posits that flesh, physicality, and the corporality of Christ were considered symbolically feminine by the thirteenth century; thus, women—who had interiorized the notion that they were more carnal than men—had a symbolic advantage: precisely because of their ostensibly carnal nature, they could identify more fully than men with the incarnate Christ, feeling his physical suffering as their own.

Taking an approach strongly influenced by Bourdieu's concept of the logic of the field and its attendant rewards, this study approaches the question of gender and affective devotion not by attempting to decode the meanings of symbols but by searching for evidence of motivation. What could women gain by performing compassion so assiduously that men could not?

They could marry Christ, this book suggests—in a literal, indeed legal, sense. Beginning with the observation that most women who engaged in intensely affective practices were nuns and recluses ritually and legally betrothed to Christ as *sponsae Christi*, I ask how this particular form of medieval marriage may have structured religious women's devotional and emotional needs and aspirations. Religious women of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries appear to have engaged in forms of legal thinking (itself emerging as a new mode of thought during this period) and to have faced an unusual legal predicament: while betrothal to Christ could be accomplished in this life, the marriage could not be "proved" or completed and confirmed as valid until the next. The *sponsa's* lifelong task was thus to prove herself worthy to be accepted by her would-be husband and crowned as true bride in heaven. Writings for and by religious women reveal much anxiety about fulfilling this task, for the preservation of virginity, once considered sufficient proof of a *sponsa's* worthiness, came to seem insufficient from the twelfth century on. The condition that gains greater authority during this period is the necessity of loving Christ "rightly," with a compassionate love that might answer Christ's gift of love in the Passion. Though this condition may sound vague and romantic to modern ears, it appears to have possessed technical specificity and legal resonance for its original audience: to "love rightly" is to love the chosen spouse with *maritalis affectio*, a quality described in canon law as the inner disposition essential to a valid marriage and a quality that women's religious culture implicitly defines as compassion. Nuns and female recluses thus had a strong legal incentive to cultivate compassion for Christ—an incentive that was lacking for all other groups in medieval society.

A close reading of a puzzling Middle English text for anchoresses, *The Wooing of Our Lord*, shows that such scripts for the performance of compassion possessed a legally performative function: by cultivating marital affection in the *sponsa's* heart, they aided in the enactment of a valid marriage to Christ. I dwell on the *Wooing* at length in this chapter not

because it was an especially significant or influential text in its own day but because the logic embedded within it has important implications for understanding the function of many meditative texts—as well as visual images and devotional practices—from the twelfth century through the close of the Middle Ages.

Perhaps more significantly, this framework can help illuminate the origins of affective devotion in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, thus contributing to a growing body of scholarly work that seeks to understand how emotional regimes change. Literary and cultural studies in recent decades, even those concentrating on how affective regimes function historically, are often quite deferential where questions concerning diachronic history, and more specifically the causes of historical change, are concerned. The diachronic history of emotion is often left to historians, as if the tools and methods of literary and cultural studies are only adequate to the task of investigating synchronic history. [Chapter 2](#) shows how methods of literary analysis—especially the theory of genre and history articulated by Hans Robert Jauss—can be used to recuperate the origins of affective devotion, for genre, gender, and historical change are in this instance intimately linked.

Despite the abundant scholarship on women and affective devotion during the last two decades, there has been a curious reluctance to acknowledge the role of women readers and patrons at the point of origins. Although it is known that women were among the earliest readers of affective prayers, there is an abiding satisfaction with the story that it was chiefly the influence of innovative men—John of Fécamp, Anselm of Canterbury, Goscelin of St. Bertin, Bernard of Clairvaux, Aelred of Rievaulx, Francis of Assisi—that effected this “revolution in feeling.” Even the recent study by historian Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion*, which locates more complex sociological and especially theological “catalysts” for historical change, powerfully reasserts the originality and influence of John of Fécamp and Anselm in particular while explicitly rejecting gender as a significant factor.

[Chapter 2](#) questions the textual basis for the prevailing story of origins. It argues that this story has been constructed on an anachronistic assumption: that the earliest affective prayers are self-expressive—that they represent the thoughts and feelings of their authors. This assumption is highly questionable, based as it is on a failure to engage with the complex historicity of a key grammatical form: the first-person singular. A close, literary-historical analysis of the “impassioned I” in the prayers of John of Fécamp and Anselm reveals that it is unlikely that these prayers are the “intimate effusions” they have been held to be. Rather, they are “intimate scripts”: the “I” in them is more closely akin to a psalmic “I,” intended to be inhabited and performed by those who requested and used the prayers. The key question then becomes that of early use: who were the original readers,

and how can we reconstruct their horizon of expectations? [Chapter 2](#) presents evidence that they were aristocratic religious women who, like the nuns and recluses described in the previous chapter, appear to have aspired to become Christ's "true" brides in the hereafter by responding to the Passion with compassion.

This explanation broadens out, in turn, to the role played by the Franciscans in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The Franciscans are championed as the great promoters of compassionate devotion to the suffering Christ, so much so that compassion itself has been called "Franciscan affect" or "Franciscan emotion." Indeed, the diffusion of the new affective mode throughout Europe is often referred to as the "Franciscan revolution." [Chapter 3](#) questions this simple and romantic vision of what Francis and his Order accomplished. It does so by focusing on a key text: the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditations on the Life of Christ*. Widely copied and translated soon after its composition in Tuscany in the fourteenth century and exerting a profound influence on devotional art, practices, literature, and drama, the *Meditations* has been hailed as "by far the most important book" in effecting the shift to a more compassionate sensibility in late medieval religion.⁶² Like many texts celebrated for their influence, however, the *Meditations* has been more admired than read. A close examination of the text reveals that it is troubled by a kind of affective dissonance: embedded within its vivid and moving "revolutionary" base are many counterrevolutionary passages that seem to arrest rather than foster feelings of compassion. And it is these reactionary, counterrevolutionary scenes that can be identified squarely as Franciscan—issuing from ideologies specific to the Order, while the affectivity of the base text issues from a different source. That source is a previously unknown text witnessed by a single Italian manuscript. This manuscript, I argue, provides strong evidence that the *Meditations* is a composite text: written originally in Italian by an unknown author, it was subsequently "corrected," glossed, and translated into Latin by a Franciscan redactor. The author of the original version is likely to have been a Tuscan nun writing for her fellow nuns. This discovery offers further evidence that affective meditation was originally a woman's genre.

Whereas [Part I](#) seeks to treat affective meditation as a Europe-wide phenomenon, [Part II](#) narrows the focus to late medieval England. How were Middle English meditations used to script compassion among a newly prominent readership of lay men and women? [Chapter 4](#) suggests that as the genre proliferated in the vernacular, it remained deeply inflected by its gendered origins. Imagining that one is a woman, in short, becomes a core mechanism for cultivating compassion in late medieval England; it is a "robust" performance feature of Middle English affective meditations in both prose and verse. Moreover, a wide range of feminine subject positions, including not only the spouse or mother of Christ but also that of feminized man, are drawn into service in the Middle English tradition as roles

productive of compassion.

This pattern can be seen in the works of Richard Rolle and other anonymous writers, but nowhere is it more evident than in the most popular of all Middle English prose meditations, Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*. An investigation of the techniques this text uses to guide its readers through affective performance, scripting private dramas of the heart, demonstrates that this work teaches its male and female readers to feel compassion by placing them in feminine subject positions. Even acts of perception are feminized here, as I show through an extended analysis of what is perhaps Love's favorite verb—*behold*. Embedded in the Middle English term *beholding* is a historically specific way of seeing: a compassionate gaze—linked here to practices of maternal and feminized sexual holding—which is presented as if it ought to generate a somatic impulse to hold the sufferer in a protective, ameliorative embrace.

Typically, Middle English affective meditations have been considered conservative in their cultural effects, for they ask their readers to feel rather than (like the Lollards and others questioning the Church at this time) to think; the approval of Love's *Mirror* by the archconservative Archbishop Arundel is a clear indication that it was considered a "safe" text. But feeling may have been a more powerful, creative, and disruptive force than Arundel supposed. As men and women engaged in the practice of affective meditation in private, out of reach of ecclesiastical authority, compassion could exert forms of cognitive pressure, provoking new ways of thinking. If emotions can be or produce "upheavals of thought" (to use Martha Nussbaum's phrase), the regular practice of feminized compassion may have produced the novel and risky ethical stance that is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 5 begins by showing that a striking change occurs in laments of the Virgin in the last decades of the fourteenth century: the formerly restrained and decorous Virgin begins to rave, vehemently protesting her son's death in ways that have struck critics as "hysterical," or even a "whipping up of emotion for its own sake rather than an understanding response to Christ's work in the Redemption."⁶³ This chapter argues that the element of emotional "excess" in late Middle English laments is a valuable clue that these texts exceed their ostensible devotional function. They are indeed upheavals of thought: these anonymous writings become a locus for the construction of a dissenting vernacular ethic founded on a new construction of maternal compassion, one that insists that this emotion be the basis not only for sharing the suffering of another but also for seeking to prevent that suffering.

Situating the laments in the context of fifteenth-century violence and nascent forms of pacifism, this chapter argues that the Virgin's voice appears to have functioned as a vehicle for moral and political protest, a performance position through which to explore and contest the notion that

the violent destruction of human bodies—and even the time-honored ideal of sacrificial death—can be a legitimate means to an end. It is because this powerful compassionate voice issues as if from maternal experience (even when men were writing or reading such laments) that it was able to flourish as a mode of thought; but it is also precisely because it issued from this marginal, feminized “source” that its radical potential to alter history remained contained.

Turning to another formal iteration of the genre, the Middle English Passion lyric, [Chapter 6](#) considers the difference form itself makes to the production of feeling. It begins by identifying a change in emotional tenor that surfaces specifically in the lyric. Thirteenth- and fourteenth-century lyrics on the Passion present the role of the bride as an enabling performance position, for brides *kyndely* (“naturally,” as well as gratefully) yield compassionate love to a worthy suitor. But in many of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century lyrics, such brides turn bad: the favored role is now that of Christ’s *unkynde*, resisting beloved—one who ignores, disdains, or violently rejects his appeals for loving compassion. A dynamic of reproach and guilt thus dominates.

An investigation of some of the manuscript contexts of the Passion lyrics appears to indicate that there is a meaningful correlation between the recalcitrant brides in the late lyrics and lay male readers. This evidence invites consideration of the potential resonance of the keyword of these lyrics—*unkynnesse*—specifically for lay men. This word carries the sense of “unnatural erotic desires,” especially for men. Thus, in these lyrics, Christ commands diametrically opposed responses from the male reader: he is begging for eroticized pity (*be not unkynde*; grant me your intimate, grateful, compassionate love, just as a bride should); yet granting this emotional response is precisely what is forbidden to the male reader on another lexical level (*be not unkynde*; be not unnatural in your erotic desires; do not feel eroticized, feminized compassion for a man). The figure of the bad bride thus suggests that elements of anxious masculinity have crept into the affective tradition. That they have done so in the lyric rather than in the more extended forms of affective meditation, such as Love’s *Mirror*, has to do with the brevity and malleability of the lyric as form—with the unique ability of the medieval anonymous lyric, this chapter suggests, to register symptoms of cultural pressure, change, or distress.

What these lyrics finally reveal is a strong element of disaffection embedded within affective devotion. I conclude by suggesting that resistance to the experience of intimate emotional communion with Christ on the cross may have been one of the cultural vulnerabilities that produced the Reformation in England. Lay men, in short, had a stake in maintaining the fiction of a stable, heterosexual masculinity in fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century England in a way that had not been true before this period. Repaying Christ affectively for the gift of his sacrifice—in the coin of the

feminized, eroticized compassion that had become so deeply entrenched in the medieval devotional tradition—was no longer what served. Attempts to configure compassion for Christ in other terms—as a feeling a man might have for a brother or friend—were haunted by the specter of same-sex desire, now increasingly censured at the highest levels of power with the rise of the Lancastrians in the fifteenth century. Performing compassion in the context of prayer had become inseparable not only from gender performance in a sense that could be understood as fictive—as provisional play or game—but also from gender performativity in the socially consequential sense. Attending to how compassion was gendered in late medieval meditative texts, then, can open up new questions about a related, large-scale cultural change: the demise of Catholic England.

PART I



The Origins of an Affective Mode



Compassion and the Making of a True *Sponsa Christi*

In the quiet, well-lit comfort of the modern British Library, with its clean architectural lines so conducive to attentive study, it is possible to examine a thirteenth-century manuscript made for a group of anchoresses living in the borderlands between England and Wales. Small in size, this manuscript (British Library MS Cotton Titus D.xviii) invites easy handling and use, as befits its content, for its texts—*Ancrene Wisse* and four related Middle English works—concern the daily practices that can make the self worthy of the beloved, Jesus. The script is clear and easy to read throughout, with the curious exception of a few folios containing the only surviving copy of the alliterative prayer *The Wooing of Our Lord*. There, certain words near the margins are only faintly legible, and some letters have disappeared altogether. The illegibility is obviously due in part to the condition of the parchment, which appears to have been of poor quality to begin with, its waxy patches not up to the task of receiving the ink indelibly. But something else was clearly involved as well: touch. The fact that those words have been effaced near the margins—at the point where thumb presses toward forefinger in the holding of the book—seems to indicate that someone touched them, touched them repeatedly, held and turned those pages often.¹

It is unlikely that this handling occurred in the postmedieval era. The *Wooing* has received only minimal attention from modern scholars, and it is hard to imagine the antiquarians who once owned the manuscript singling out this text for obsessive perusal.² A little detective work, then, points to a long-dead anchoress as the person with ink on her hands. It was in all likelihood the woman for whom the text was copied, or the sisters to whom she presumably passed the book, who lifted those letters, effacing the words by using them as scripts for the performance of prayer. And indeed, both scribe and author seem to have assumed that the text would be read regularly. Conspicuous rubrics make the *Wooing* the easiest work to find in the volume, and in the concluding colophon, an authorial voice encourages the anchoress to use this prayer whenever she has time: “Pray for me, my dear sister. I have written you this because words often allure the heart to think on our Lord. And so, when you are at ease, talk to Jesus and say these words. And imagine that he hangs beside you, bloody, on the cross. And may he, through his grace, open your heart to his love, and to pity for his

pain.”³ “When you are at ease”: such moments would not be hard to come by for an anchoress, perpetually enclosed in her cell, freed as she was from the liturgical rounds and domestic duties of the convent; indeed, gaining more time for private prayer appears to have been a major reason why nuns became anchoresses.⁴ Taken together, these effacements, rubrics, and colophon invite us to recuperate a lost performance scenario. Such signs of iterative use can—and should, if we are to go about the task of historical recovery properly—trigger an act of imagination, transporting us from a moment in the present, in a calm reading room amid a bustling modern metropolis, to a small church in a high valley in the Welsh Marches; to a woman walled up in a cell, breaking the silence of this still place, speaking sweet terms of endearment to her lover in the familiar vernacular:

Iesu, swete Iesu—
mi druth, mi derling, mi drihtin
mi healend, mi huniter, mi haliwei;
swetter is munegunge of the
then mildeu o muthe ... (20)

[Jesus, sweet Jesus—
my dear, my darling, my Lord
my Savior, my honey-drop, my balm;
sweeter is the memory of you
than honey in the mouth ... (247–48)]

And we can imagine her voicing these words forthrightly (“carpe toward iesu”), as if Jesus were right there beside her, as if this were not a radically solitary space, a living tomb, but a bower, a place for the exchange of the most intimate affections.

It will be important to eavesdrop more intently on this love talk, for its details open out onto a distant emotional world that has so far been glimpsed only at its periphery. First, however, it is necessary to explain why this obscure work deserves our attention at all. The reason is simple: the *Wooing* presents a serious critical problem. Formally, stylistically, and generically, this text does not fit into the readily available categories for devotional literature. As we will see, its second half consists of a powerfully evocative meditation on the Passion that would on its own stand as one of the finest examples of the genre; but this meditation is preceded by what appears to be an extended fantasy of literal marriage to Christ—as if the writer were familiar with the terms of Bernardine allegory but missed the point. This lowering of the allegorical level is not only problematic in itself; it also makes of the whole a puzzling diptych whose structural logic is not obvious. Given this lack of intelligibility, it is no wonder that histories of medieval devotional literature have typically treated the *Wooing*—when they have mentioned it at all—as an awkward outlier.⁵

But it is precisely because it sits outside familiar interpretive categories that the *Wooing* can open up a broad question that has by now come to seem well and firmly settled: why women? Why is it that women appear to have been drawn to affective meditation on the Passion and related devotional practices so strongly? And why is it that their spiritual advisers encouraged them so assiduously in such devotions?

For the past two decades, the explanation so carefully articulated by Caroline Bynum has offered the most persuasive framework for interpretation.⁶ Bynum posits late medieval ideas about “woman’s nature” as foundational: women, because they were considered more “carnal” than men, could identify more fully with the incarnate Christ, whose suffering body was understood to be symbolically feminine. Originally developed to explain a discrete set of ascetic practices, Bynum’s work has been extrapolated to explain the meanings undergirding gendered patterns in the production and use of many meditative texts and visual images. And though it has had its critics, Bynum’s model retains tremendous explanatory force.⁷

This chapter offers another framework for understanding the link between women and affective devotion, one that complements Bynum’s and in many cases serves the evidence better, particularly where the practice of devotional reading is concerned. Bynum has focused on symbolic meanings as the key to cultural practices. But what about motives? What, in short, could women gain by cultivating compassion for Christ that men could not? Highly advantageous marriages, I suggest.

Using the *Wooing* as a touchstone, I will amplify this argument in the pages that follow. I will show that the *Wooing*’s apparent structural and stylistic flaws are not intrinsic to the text itself. Rather, they arise from a misunderstanding of the marriage dramatized in the work’s first half. The literalization of marital discourse is not an inept imitation of Bernard or a naive if charming misuse of metaphor: in calling herself Christ’s “spuse,” the speaker is calling a spouse a spouse. For this text was scripted for a woman, and sometimes bodies do make a semiotic difference. For male religious, the identity *sponsa* functioned as a provisional persona, a role entered into imaginatively in the course of prayer. But female religious—precisely because they were female—could participate in another signifying system, this one social and historical: if the standard rituals were enacted, chastity observed, and, crucially, the fitting feelings repeatedly performed, female religious could become literally, by which I mean legally, married to Christ—not only in this life but for all eternity.⁸

Illuminating the logic of the *Wooing* thus requires another, larger task: that of recovering the “logic of the field,” in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms—in this case, the field of legal marriage to Christ. By “field,” of course, Bourdieu refers to a distinct social realm with its own signifying practices, rules, strategies, struggles, and rewards—rewards Bourdieu describes as forms of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital.⁹ Legal marriage to Christ

appears to have offered some remarkable rewards, both on earth and in the hereafter; as the speaker of the *Wooing* puts it, anticipating Bourdieu's market metaphor, "I cannot give my love to any man for a sweeter profit" (248–49).¹⁰ But enacting this type of marriage appears to have been a complex and difficult process. My procedure in what follows is thus a double one: to sketch the legal field in which the *Wooing* is embedded and to show, in turn, how marriage law is embedded in the *Wooing*. In the end, I will suggest that it is a particular legal concept, that of "marital affection" (*maritalis affectio*) that unites the *Wooing*'s two parts and reveals the all-important legal function of the text's intensely emotional meditation on the Passion. This analysis, in turn, has significant implications for understanding the social function of an emotion in the high and later Middle Ages: repeated acts of feeling compassion seem in effect to have served a legally performative function for women wishing to become Christ's "true" brides.

THE PROBLEM OF *THE WOOING OF OUR LORD*

A close reading of the *Wooing*'s oddities must be our starting point. Paradoxically, recognizing the problematic character of this text must begin with seeing how very good it is as a script for the compassionate performance it demands: when granted an unprejudiced reading, its meditation on the Passion comes to seem one of the most remarkable examples of affective prayer surviving from the medieval period. In fact, this meditation could be said to define the genre, so skillfully does it seek to move the reader to a compassionate response to Christ's suffering and death.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on the techniques the *Wooing* deploys to create this effect, for doing so can take us out of the realm of the subjective experience of what is "moving" and enable a more objective appraisal. How does it move? The *Wooing* includes the key elements typically said to constitute the genre and mark it off from other devotional forms. It insists on imaginative performance as a primary means of producing emotion, casting the reader as eyewitness to the events of the Passion as they unfold in relentless narrative sequence. It portrays Christ not as King or Lord but as "Iesu": a pitiable human victim who stoops under the weight of the cross; suffers pain and humiliation as he is stripped, whipped, and covered with spit; submits to utter subjection as he is forced to ascend the cross; and bleeds so profusely that his body is a river of red. This text not only enlists the power of visual detail to elicit affective response but, just as crucially, structures a way of seeing: knowing that scenes of suffering do not inevitably produce pity in those who witness them—that the cross itself can be viewed as triumph, as glory—the *Wooing* frames such scenes as pitiable by giving the text's performer the eyes of a lover ("Ah! how can I live for pity? I who see for myself my beloved man upon the cross, and his limbs so stretched that I can count every bone in his body" [255]). Even as

the *Wooing* enlists the power of the erotic dyad by casting the Passion as a supreme act of love for the beloved (“now my love dies for me” [255]), it offers maternal compassion as a supplementary model through the speaker’s solicitude for Mary: “Lady, mother and maiden, you stood here very close, and saw all this sorrow come upon your precious son” (255). And in all this, the *Wooing* exploits the affective potential of two simple grammatical tools. Through the use of the first-person singular, it offers its reader an impassioned “I” to enter into and make her own; and through an abrupt move from the past to the present tense, it stages a temporal and experiential breakthrough, drawing distant events powerfully into the here and now: “Ah! what shall I do now? Now my heart can break apart, my eyes all overflow with water. Ah! now is my lover condemned to die!” (254).¹¹

On historical grounds, too, the *Wooing* merits attention—for it is a prodigy. Written no later than circa 1250 and possibly several decades earlier, it anticipates and indeed out-Franciscans “Franciscan” literature in many ways, especially in its confident vernacularity. The *Wooing* appears to be the earliest surviving instance of an extended affective meditation on the Passion in English; in fact, it is one of the earliest in any vernacular.¹² Yet the language is handled with supreme skill, the heft and stress and robustness of its Englishness exploited to the full. In a way Richard Rolle would have envied had he known of this text, the *Wooing* harnesses the power of the native alliterative style to build a driving rhythm that has profound somatic effects. The *Wooing*’s rhapsodic momentum is clearly calculated to stir its performer’s blood, quickening her pulse, generating a breathless intensity through its increasingly rapid exclamations as the events of the Passion approach their terrible climax. This stirring up of passion would have facilitated an immediacy of experience that was fully of the body as well as of the heart and mind—one issuing in expressions of fierce desire to meet Christ’s suffering body where it is, both now (“now my heart can break apart” [254]) and forever: “My body will hang with your body, nailed on the cross, fastened, transfixed within four walls. And I will hang with you and nevermore come from my cross until I die” (256).¹³

The *Wooing*’s Passion meditation, then, is a compelling piece of writing, not only in its impassioned beauty but also in the interest it holds for the history of the genre, the history of devotion, and the history of emotion. These qualities, however, have been obscured by the Passion meditation’s structural entrapment—by the way it is framed, or “enclosed.”

Nearly the entire first half concerns marriage to Christ. As we have seen, it opens with a litany of endearments that establish “swete Jesu” as the speaker’s beloved. It then goes on to celebrate that union, taking up one by one the reasons why Christ is an ideal spouse. In general, of course, the application of nuptial language to Christ is unproblematic. The metaphor is pervasive in religious writings, whether in the form of mystical allegory in the *Song of Songs* tradition or in the parable of Christ, the lover-knight.¹⁴ The

text's editor assimilates it to the familiar conventions, placing it in "the tradition of the mystical marriage of the Heavenly Bridegroom with Holy Church or the human soul—above all the soul of the religious who renounces earthly desire."¹⁵ But this assessment cannot be right. For in place of mystical rapture and the fusion of soul with soul in transcendent embrace, what we encounter here is a set of very down-to-earth, logical arguments for choosing Christ as mate: since Christ is richer, wiser, stronger, and more handsome than any earthly suitor, the speaker muses, he is clearly a better catch than any man on the marriage market in thirteenth-century England. Ample possessions are clearly important in a spouse, for instance: "But is anyone richer than you, my beloved, who rules in heaven? You are the renowned ruler who created this whole world. For as the holy prophet David says, 'The earth is the Lord's and all that fills it, the world and all that lives therein, heaven with its pleasures and its immeasurable joys' (Psalm 23:1)—all is yours, my sweet one, and you will give me all if I love you rightly" (248).¹⁶ If high birth is a crucial consideration, Christ likewise comes out on top: "Where can I choose a nobler man than you, who are the Son of the King who rules this world, and King and equal with your Father, King over kings, Lord over lords?" (250).¹⁷ And so on. In this script, the speaker seems to be congratulating herself on her prudence in taking Christ as husband rather than mystical lover or fictive lover-knight; as if marriage to him can be enacted in a literal sense; as if becoming Christ's wife is the issue.

The pronounced stylistic differences between the *Wooing's* two parts contribute to the conundrum of its function. In terms of tone and rhetoric, the marriage-market soliloquy and the Passion meditation could hardly be more different. The first is playful, witty, and logical. Prudence, not passion, governs the speaker's thoughts here. The argument proceeds with calm deliberation, each criterion for spousehood being taken up and carefully considered, and each section is framed by the "if ... then" rhetoric of reason. In contrast, the Passion meditation is, as we have seen, replete with pathos. Reason gives way to emotion in the mind of the speaker, a breakdown reflected in the collapse of grammatical structure. Sentences become fragmentary, and exclamations abound; even the phrase at the very center of the drama lacks a logic-lending verb: "Ah! that lovely body, that hangs so pitifully, so bloody and so cold" (255). Given these discrepancies, the hinge that unites the two parts seems to be nothing more than a convenient, mechanical transition: "But over all other things those hard bitter hurts make you worthy of my love, the shameful pains you suffered for me, your bitter torment and passion" (251).¹⁸

The issue that a close reading raises, then, is a fundamental one: what do marriage and the Passion have to do with each other? Everything, we might say under other circumstances. In the high mystical tradition, erotic love and suffering go hand in hand—a notion embedded in the etymology of the very word *passio*, as Erich Auerbach has shown.¹⁹ Even in the humbler pastures of

the contemporary English lyric (“Iesu, lemman swete,” and so on), the yearning to feel Christ’s pain is easily assimilated to the longing of a lover.²⁰ But the logic undergirding such uses is manifestly a sexual and emotional logic, one in which marriage—as marriage—is irrelevant: it is not the institutional bond of husband and wife but the intimate erotic drama of two lovers on which the mystical meanings turn. In contrast, eros is not the primary interest in the *Wooing*’s marital reverie: although it hovers around the terms of endearment in those opening lines and in the descriptions of Christ’s beauty (“You are lovely of face, you are all shining, to look into your face is life itself to the angels” [248]), the emphasis is squarely on marriage as social institution, one that confers social benefits—benefits which will be realized most fully in heaven, where the speaker imagines herself sitting at Christ’s right hand, ruling with him, crowned as his queen.²¹ The question thus remains: what can marriage to Christ—cast here (with self-conscious wit) as an ideal perch for a social climber—have to do with the iterative performance of emotion and with the performance of compassion in particular?

The hinge uniting these two things is, I suggest, the deep structuring power of the law as it was understood and even in part constructed by religious women. The *Wooing* was written for a woman who wished to enact a legal marriage to Christ; and the act of feeling compassion—obsessively over the course of a lifetime, in a way that could transform the self—was fundamental to this performative process and the attainment of its rare rewards.

LEGAL MARRIAGE TO CHRIST

I am not the first to notice that the term *sponsa Christi* could hold legal significance for religious women. In a prominent article published in 1990, Thomas Head put the matter plainly: “Being a ‘bride of Christ’ was not *like* marriage to Christ, it *was* marriage to Christ.”²² Head substantiates this claim through a close study of the *Life of Christina of Markyate*, situating this text in a rich matrix of legal records, canon law, sacramental definitions of marriage, consecration rituals, and marriage ceremonies and vows. Because it illustrates the juridical character of one woman’s marriage to Christ so vividly, Christina’s story is worth recalling here.

Born to parents of the Anglo-Saxon nobility, Christina decided as a young girl that Christ, and no other, would be her bridegroom. When she approached marriageable age, she made a visit to a local abbey and secretly dedicated herself to Christ, using the gestures and language of a legal betrothal or *desponsatio*, which at the time was typically constituted by consent, a *pactio coniugal*is or marriage agreement, and the exchange of gifts. “It was these ritual actions,” Head observes, “which set Christina’s vow apart from a simple vow of virginity and made it into a betrothal to Christ.”²³

Christina then told a priest of her betrothal, and he confirmed it with a blessing. Her parents, however, had a better match in mind: marriage to a certain Burthred—well-connected, rich, the *right* sort of son-in-law. Christina resisted this plan on the grounds that she was already betrothed to Christ, but her parents forced her to enter into a *desponsatio* with Burthred. When Christina refused to accept the validity of what was to her a second marriage, her parents urged Burthred to consummate the union by force, but Christina was able to hide and flee. Finally Christina's parents took the matter before the local ecclesiastical authorities. Evaluating the various criteria—who had said and done what, whether consent was given, and so forth—various judges returned different opinions. There is no need to recount here the complexities of these legal arguments or the circuitous route through which Christina was freed from her obligations to Burthred and allowed to solemnize her status as *sponsa Christi*; Head discusses these matters in detail. What is significant about Christina's legal trials for the present discussion is this: as the monk of St. Albans describes it, the debate was never about whether marriage to Christ was "real" or merely "metaphorical." The issue was whether the proper legal criteria had been fulfilled. *The Life of Christina of Markyate* expresses no doubt about the possibility of entering, via a vow of virginity and the ritual actions of a *desponsatio*, into a legally binding marriage to Christ—even by a woman who was not a nun and whose betrothal had been made in secret.

Head's analysis of Christina's "two marriages" is compelling, sound, and persuasive. Yet while the article is, from one point of view, pathbreaking, it has not actually functioned as such. In the years since its publication, there have been no serious attempts to map legal marriage to Christ more broadly. In part, the neglect of this subject may be a sign of the priorities of feminist scholarship since the early 1990s.²⁴ But it may also have to do with methodological assumptions about what constitutes evidence that marriage to Christ had legal status and force. In this respect, Head's work has perhaps inadvertently closed down the very possibilities that it promises to open up; for the kinds of evidence that make Head's argument so convincing are precisely what make it hard to extend. First, Christina's case, because it was contested, entered the indisputably legal realm of the court of law. While this situation is not unparalleled—witness the phenomenon of the abducted or runaway nun—it was certainly not the norm.²⁵ Second, Christina's *vita* is replete with unmistakably juridical language—the language of the *votum*, the *desponsatio*, and so on; and although this too has parallels (in the writings of Gertrude the Great, for example), it is not a salient feature of most writings for, by, or about female religious. And third, at least as Head reads it, the *vita* does not deploy nuptial language figuratively. This is worth emphasizing, for it is fundamental to Head's analysis:

The monk of Saint Albans considered marriage—to Christ as much as

to human beings—to be a juridical or contractual relationship *rather than a metaphor* [emphasis mine]. The use of the term *sponsa Christi* was thus of a different order from those works which modeled the marriage of humans to Christ on language derived from the *Song of Songs*. Whereas the monk of Saint Albans *never* [emphasis mine] cited that biblical text, even indirectly, he frequently used the legal and liturgical language of contemporary marriage practice. While medieval marriage rituals themselves, like all Christian liturgies, used much biblically inspired language, it is interesting to note that no such ritual employed language from the *Song of Songs*.²⁶

It is this apparent linguistic purity—the fact that Christina’s *vita* is not “infected,” as it were, by the figurative language of the *Song of Songs*—that finally allows Head to make his case for the juridical valence of Christina’s marriage so forcefully. But the chances of finding such a consistently non-figurative register in other texts pertaining to female religious are slim. As anyone familiar with the sources will know, poetry keeps rearing its lovely head.

There are ways to honor and extend Head’s work, however, and the first requires questioning his assumptions about language. The clear suggestion, in the passage cited above, is that the presence of any obviously figurative language in a source will necessarily compromise the claim that marriage to Christ has a literal or legal significance in that source—as if the presence of metaphor anywhere inevitably signals its presence everywhere. I wish to question this “either/or” method and to propose “both/and” as the more fruitful, as well as the more logical, approach. When given any careful consideration, the proposition that a term must have *either* literal *or* symbolic significance is difficult to sustain. Literal and metaphorical meanings can and do coexist in a single word, phrase, text, genre, or discursive realm—and certainly in a single mind. If this is true about language in general, it is demonstrably true of medieval nuptial language in particular. Bernard himself, for instance, was quite capable of using the term *sponsa* in a literal way. In a letter addressed to the nun Sophia, for example, he refers to Christ as her Bridegroom because of the “pledges of betrothal” exchanged upon the occasion of her consecration.²⁷ In this, Bernard is in line with many other advisers to women who, even within a single text, use the term *sponsa Christi* as a marker of social identity even as they go on to offer the said *sponsa* a set of nuptial metaphors for heightening her felt experience of the divine in the context of prayer. Complicating the issue further is the fact that even when one can locate specifically juridical nuptial language in texts for female religious, it is not always to be taken straight. One can see Stephen Langton, for instance, reveling in the play of metaphor in his *Letter to Virgins*, taking the legal lexicon he had so fully absorbed in Paris and using it to lend color and wit to a parable in which the devil, not Christ, is

the virgin's *contractus*.²⁸ Other instances of playing with legal metaphor surface in prominent places: Clare of Assisi is praised in the canonization documents for having "divorced the world," and so on.²⁹

Rather than seeking primarily to unearth a technical vocabulary of legal marriage to Christ, then, I propose a more fundamental experiment: that of listening for the literal. This is not easy. Nuptial language is not only abundantly present in religious writings of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but voluptuous in its multiplicity of meanings. The challenge is not to reduce this polysemy but to honor it more fully by asking whether it also incorporates a literal understanding of marriage to Christ; whether even an assertively poetic register, in other words, might name—even as it amplifies and celebrates—a relationship that was understood to be a real matrimonial bond. In practical terms, this task requires bringing close reading skills to bear on how certain key words (the simple *sponsus* and *sponsa* chief among them) are being used—and resisting the deeply ingrained scholarly reflex of casting them, without careful assessment, into the Bernardine mystical orbit.

In addition to this literal-minded, "both/and" method, I propose considering a wider range of sources. The most obvious are those known to have had juridical force: rites for the consecration of virgins. But while rites provide strong evidence that the bond to Christ was considered a legal union, they say little about how that legality then functioned—how it may have influenced women's ways of living, thinking, and feeling from consecration until the moment of death. For these questions, the most promising trove of evidence is a rich array of sources not marked specifically as legal: the entire range of texts and images issuing from religious women's culture. Legalism is embedded in these sources, I suggest.³⁰ But seeing this requires that we grant such sources legitimacy as sites of legal thinking and practice. Though this gesture may seem bold, recent trends in legal history make it less so. For one thing, even experts in "official" legal history of the most rigorous sort are now engaged in recovering a more ample sense of the legal, an effort encapsulated in the very willingness to use the phrase "legal culture."³¹ More broadly, those working in the nexus of law and literature have called attention to the anachronistic distinctions, both generic and disciplinary, that have prevented modern scholars from recognizing the value of sources not manifestly enshrined as juridical.³² Taken together, these developments open up a host of sources, even the manifestly fictive or poetic, for analysis as places where the law lives; where legal ideas get invented, elaborated or refined and legal practice is reflected.

By opening up such sources, suddenly we have too much to work with rather than too little. What follows is a summary of what I have found by looking at writings by, for, and about religious women from the late eleventh through the thirteenth centuries—the period when legal thinking emerged as a central aspect of western European culture, when marriage law in

particular was still in flux, and when religious women and their advisers could participate in inventing a concept of legal marriage. Since I focus on the eleventh- and twelfth-century material in [Chapter 2](#), I will refer here primarily to three clusters of texts that surround the *Wooing* temporally: the Middle English anchoritic literature, documents concerning Clare of Assisi and the early Poor Clares, and the writings of the nuns of Helfta.

First, then, the rites. Even the earliest surviving rites of consecration, dating from the fourth century, are like contemporary wedding ceremonies: nuns are veiled, receive rings and crowns, and so on.³³ It is thus tempting to conclude that such rites are derivative, that they stand as imitation or quotation rather than the real, uncompromised thing. But this conclusion is difficult to sustain. It is simply not clear much of the time which ceremony derived from which. There are at least a few instances in which parts of rites for the consecration of virgins were adapted for use in ordinary marriage ceremonies. More fundamentally, rites of consecration do nothing to mark their nuptial regalia, language, and gestures as anything less than real or efficacious. A rite composed by a monk from Mainz in the late tenth century, which circulated widely in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and was remodeled and recirculated by the Roman Curia in the thirteenth, clearly casts consecration as a marriage between Christ and his *sponsa*.³⁴ The virgin, veiled as a bride, is given away by her parents, escorted to the bishop, Christ's proxy, in a formal *traditio virginis* paralleling the *traditio puellae* of an ordinary wedding. The *traditio* is then sealed with the *dextrarum iunctio*—here, the joining of the right hands of virgin and bishop. The virgin then accepts the nuptial ring and crown as the bishop recites the following words: “Accipe annulum fidei, signaculum spiritus sancti, ut sponsa Dei voceris, si ei fideliter servieris” (Accept the ring of faith, sign of the Holy Spirit, that you may be called the spouse of God if you serve Him faithfully.) “Accipe signum Christi in capite, ut uxor eius efficiaris et, si in eo permanseris, in perpetuum coroneris” (Accept this sign of Christ on your head, that you may become his wife and, if you persist in this state, you may be crowned unto eternity).³⁵ Both of these gestures functioned as legally performative acts in ordinary marriage ceremonies: to accept the ring or crown could, along with other acts, serve to forge a marriage contract.³⁶ Nothing indicates that these acts have anything less than legal efficacy here.

But there is a striking difference in the case of the virgin's *desponsatio*: its conditionality is insisted upon. The virgin accepts Christ as spouse in accepting both ring and crown, but she is assured of full acceptance by Christ as *sponsa* and *uxor* only at some future point, if she proves herself worthy. The bishop's conditional clauses make this clear: *si ei fideliter servieris; si in eo permanseris*. Though it parallels contemporary marriage ceremonies, the Mainz rite appears to function more like a binding betrothal.³⁷ This distinction has complex implications, and we will return to

exploring them. Here, it is important simply to note that this conditional language coexists with confident affirmations that a contract with Christ has been made or is being made through the enactment of this ceremony. Even as the bishop utters the phrases above, the virgin herself proclaims that the imposition of the ring and crown have already made her Christ's bride: "Annulo suo subarravit me Dominus meus Jesus Christus, et tanquam sponsam decoravit me corona" (My lord Jesus Christ has contracted himself to me with this ring, just as he has adorned me as spouse with a crown).³⁸ The anthem scripted for the virgin at the outset of the ceremony is equally confident. Taken from the *Passio* of St. Agnes—the *sponsa Christi* par excellence, who rejected an earthly suitor in order to marry Christ—this antiphon was to become one of the most enduring features of the consecration rite as it evolved in the ensuing centuries: "Ideo sum desponsata cui angeli serviunt, cuius pulchritudinem sol et luna mirantur" (I am betrothed to one whom the angels serve, at whose beauty the sun and moon marvel).³⁹ The beauty of these lines and their status as words to be sung situates them in the realm of the poetic; yet they could also potentially function as a statement of legal fact: "Ideo sum desponsata." The Mainz rite thus presents itself as a ceremony that binds a woman to Christ as his legal *sponsa*, even if it also registers quite strongly the notion that further proofs of fidelity and service would be required of her.

Any investigation of the juridical significance of this rite, however, requires attention to another foundational act: the taking of a vow. The Mainz rite does not include a vow, and indeed this is just what we should expect. Ordinary marriage rites from this period do not include vows, which were typically uttered before to the ceremony. Thus, while the Mainz rite alludes to the virgin's *propositum*, it does not indicate the content of that *propositum*. But we can assume that a vow of virginity (or of chastity, in the case of widows) would have preceded the rite. Given the lack of explicitly nuptial language in such vows, it might be possible to conclude that the legal act is a commitment to virginity, a commitment that the consecration rite celebrates—dramatically, poetically, symbolically, but not necessarily legally—as a betrothal to Christ.

Not surprisingly, this is a question some liturgists worried over in the early thirteenth century. Certain rites issued by the Roman Curia during this time alter the words spoken when the ring and crown are imposed, transforming these gestures into confirmations of the vow of virginity.⁴⁰ The hesitation such rites register, however, met an authoritative response in the 1280s, when the pontifical of William Durand, the first great lawyer-liturgist, became the official pontifical of the Roman Church. Durand's rite of consecration, which he calls a *desponsatio*, has all the dramatic flair of the most lavish contemporary marriage ceremonies.⁴¹ And it incorporates a vow that is explicitly marital. After the nuns vow to persevere in virginity, they vow to marry Christ: "Vultis benedici, consecrari et domino nostro Iesu

Christo summi regis filio desponsari? Respondent omnes: Volumus” (Do you will to be blessed, consecrated, and betrothed to our Lord Jesus Christ son of the most high King? They respond: We do will it.)⁴² Later, a rubric specifies “then the bishop marries them to Christ in this way.”⁴³

Durand’s rite thus boldly asserts that consecration is a legal betrothal to Christ. But it appears to be only that: a betrothal, a marriage begun but not yet completed. In this regard, it is important to recognize the distinction so prominent in medieval marriage law between an agreement made *per verba de futuro*—a legally binding pledge to marry but to complete the marriage at a future date—and one made *per verba de presenti*, which had the power to make a marriage on the spot if there were no impediments. The first type of bond could be dissolved for a number of reasons; the second could not. The church never specified, however, precisely which words were to be used in order to make this distinction unambiguous (since marriage promises were typically uttered in the vernacular, in all its messiness and variety, this may well have been impossible). Records of marriage disputes provide evidence of significant uncertainty as to whether parties had succeeded in uttering promises *per verba de presenti*, even if it was their clear intention to do so.⁴⁴ The dual senses of the English “will,” even in early Middle English, illustrates the difficulty of the problem: the word can express either present or future intent.⁴⁵ This is one reason why consummation continued to be such an important factor in marriage-making in practice, even though canon law had by the late twelfth century officially demoted it from the place it had held in Gratian’s *Decretum* as the step which “completed” a marriage.⁴⁶ Consummation had the power to override the ambiguities of language in the sense that the jurists held that a marriage contract made *per verba de futuro* and followed by consummation was automatically accorded the same status as one made *per verba de presenti*. Marriages that were never consummated—whether this was for spiritual or other reasons—were always more vulnerable (more vulnerable, that is, to the charge that they had never been made) than marriages that were.⁴⁷

The conditional language in the rites of consecration, then, aligns those rites with espousals made *per verba de futuro*, even as it gestures toward the vulnerability of a *sponsa Christi*’s marriage more generally. Her marriage was itself *de futuro*: begun but not yet securely and finally enacted. Legally bound to Christ, the *sponsa* was nonetheless deprived of the certainty that this was a valid, indissoluble marriage. To what future moment of certainty, then, could she aspire? And why would such certainty be worth the wait?

JURISDICTIONAL RANGE: *SPONSA E CHRISTI* IN THE HEREAFTER

The most striking aspect of legal marriage to Christ, as I read its development in the sources, is its surprising jurisdictional range: as a distinct field shaping and reflecting the practices of the players who enter it,

it appears to have extended to the hereafter. This range is why the stakes are so high. Like Christina of Markyate, twelfth- and thirteenth-century women often manifested a strong desire to secure their status as brides of Christ before earthly authorities for earthly purposes—as a means of eluding designing kin and zealous suitors and obtaining a degree of power over their earthly existence. But what emerges most insistently from these writings is the fervent wish to be accepted—at last and securely—as a “true bride” by the ultimate authority, the one whose judgment really mattered: Christ himself. The moment of entry into the next world, when the *sponsa* meets Christ face to face and is welcomed by him as spouse, is a crucial moment in the sources—one whose supreme juridical significance appears to be signaled by Christ’s pronouncement of language from the consecration rites (“Come my spouse!”) as well as two gestures: Christ’s crowning of his bride and his taking her by the right hand. The legal resonance of these gestures can be deduced from a comparison to earthly practice. In surviving rituals from Italy, for instance, the Latin *matrimonium* is translated as *incoronazione*, or “crowning”; the joining of right hands, the *dextrarum iunctio*, was often taken to be a definitive ratification of the union in wedding ceremonies throughout Europe.⁴⁸

What was to be gained by meriting this particular gesture of acceptance, by becoming, as Gertrude of Helfta puts it, Christ’s *vera sponsa et uxor*?⁴⁹ Answering this question requires a brief look at the history of heaven. Heaven, of course, has changed over the centuries, and the twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed some very striking developments. While certain thinkers, including most notably Thomas Aquinas, preferred to imagine a solitary state of disembodied, intellectual communion with the divine, the trend was generally toward imagining a place of social and sensual delights, a place where rank and hierarchy were justly apportioned, friendship and communication were perfected, and the body itself was resurrected with, as Bynum has shown, full particularity of attribute.⁵⁰ For brides of Christ, this version of heaven, in part constructed by them, had important implications: there the rewards of marriage to Christ could be experienced in all their fullness.⁵¹

These rewards include a high degree of what Bourdieu might call symbolic capital—rank and prestige in the heavenly hierarchy. “If you suffer with him, with him you will reign,” Clare writes to Agnes of Prague, reassuring her that having rejected “the heights of an earthly kingdom and the less than worthy offers of an imperial marriage” (marriage to Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor, German king, king of Sicily, king of Jerusalem), she will enjoy a far more prestigious position as Christ’s queen.⁵² *Holy Maidenhood* urges its readers to think of the virgin martyrs, who “gave up the sons of kings and noblemen.... Think how good it is for them now, and how they give thanks for it now in God’s arms, queens of heaven.”⁵³ The language here gestures toward two other types of motivating reward:

material gain (manifest in these texts—in ways that deserve the serious attention they have not yet received—as heavenly mansions, rich clothing, jewels, lavish banquets, and so on) and fulfilling relationships with others. The latter generally includes the pleasant companionship of Christ's other wives, whose happy cohesion as a group is often imagined as a dance (a plurality of *sponsae* is apparently no obstacle to legitimacy or to a wife's happiness in this form of marriage). And it includes special intimacy with Christ himself. The specific character of this intimacy is difficult to interpret. It seems that what is most often envisioned is a marriage to Christ that does not involve consummation—thus, a form of marriage analogous to a legitimate earthly version of the matrimonial bond, one in which the spouses agree to refrain from sexual relations.⁵⁴ Some women, however—most strikingly Mechthild of Magdeburg and Gertrude the Great—speak of Christ's embraces in the heavenly bridal chamber in language that has struck certain readers as open to literal interpretation.⁵⁵ What is clear is that marriage to Christ was understood to have an exceptional emotional intimacy at its core. This is what is yearned for, hoped for, promised; and it is fully compatible with—indeed infused by—expectations about rank, power, and material comforts. Material comforts, especially in their luxurious, overtly sensuous forms, are often spoken of as sustaining, supporting, and reflecting an emotional bond. Christ's rank and power make his attention exquisite, giving it increased emotional value.

Along with the promise of such rewards, however, comes a sense of continual striving, or to use a word that frequently recurs in the anchoritic texts, “climbing.” Here, Bourdieu's conception of the field as “a ‘field of struggles’ in which agents’ strategies are concerned with the preservation or improvement of their positions with respect to the defining capital of the field” helps illuminate a crucial aspect of marriage to Christ, one whose juridical force might too easily be collapsed into the readily available scholarly categories for what “ascent” can mean in religious writings.⁵⁶ For if many of these texts are obsessed with the status and pleasures to be gained through marriage to Christ, they are equally insistent that only “true” brides will reap these rewards. Gertrude, as we have seen, desires to become Christ's true bride and wife, *vera sponsa et uxor*. In thinking it necessary to include the word *vera*, Gertrude participates in a much larger discourse concerning “true” versus “false” brides. In the *Ancrene Wisse*, for instance, the distinction between true and false anchoresses is a prominent theme. Such anxieties are gathered into and replicated across many domains of religious women's culture through the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins. In addition to its use as an exhortation to all souls to prepare for Christ's coming, this parable seems to have been recast as both threat and promise directed specifically to *sponsae Christi*: those who have not legitimately earned the title will be rejected at the moment of truth; those who have earned the title will be taken by the right hand, by Christ, and

accepted as his bride. Bonaventure, for instance, writes to the nuns of St. Clare in Assisi: “Be so attentive in continuing your affections and fervent in the spirit of devotion that when the cry is raised, ‘the Bridegroom is coming,’ you will be able to meet him with faithfulness and with the lamps of your souls filled with the oil of charity and joy. While the foolish virgins are left outside, you will go in with Him to the wedding of eternal happiness.”⁵⁷

Precisely what was understood to make a bride “true” varies somewhat in these texts, which is just as we might expect. Jean Gaudemet’s useful formulation “mariage par étapes” serves as a reminder that in practice marriage making seems to have been understood as a process whose constitutive steps often depended on local custom.⁵⁸ But as we have seen in our brief survey of consecration rituals, as well as in the case of Christina’s clandestine marriage to Christ, the process generally began with the enactment of a betrothal or *desponsatio*. It is in this context that the nature and function of the nuptial language in the *Wooing of Our Lord* is best understood.

COMPASSION AS MARITAL AFFECTION FOR THE *SPONSA CHRISTI*

Equipped with another register of meaning in which we can interpret nuptial language, we can see the *Wooing*’s first half as something more than naive or concretized Bernardine allegory, and far more interesting. On close inspection, this opening section seems to be a script for the performance of a legal betrothal to Christ—poetically elaborated, to be sure, but structured around the three parts of a *desponsatio*: consent, the nuptial promise, and the exchange of gifts. First, the element of consent is celebrated. A positive relishing of a woman’s power to choose accounts for the exuberance and wit of the first half of the work. Imagining a vast array of lovers who would, if she wished, be hers, the speaker foregrounds her own identity as a desiring subject. Frank expressions of desire and self-interest (“I want to choose a lover for his possessions” and “a stalwart lover pleases me” [248, 250])—predominate here.⁵⁹ The vocabulary of desire is rich: forms of *will*, *want*, and *choose* even appear in the same phrases, a redundancy that celebrates through excess her power to consent freely.

Fixing on Jesus as the spouse she most desires, the speaker’s wishes then transmute into promises. The word *will*, expressive of consent through much of the opening section, begins to take on the cast of an enduring promise: “I will hold to you, then, my beloved, and love you for yourself, and for your love leave all other things that could draw my heart or turn it from your love. I will love you, Jesus Christ, more generous than anyone.... I will love you, Jesus, stronger than anyone.... I will love you, then, sweet Jesus, as the noblest creature who ever lived on earth” (249–50).⁶⁰ Even the speaker’s pledge to endure poverty for her spouse (“I will be poor for you as you were for love of me” [253]) appears to anticipate the wedding promise to take the

other for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer.⁶¹

These promises are confirmed through the third feature of the *desponsatio*, the exchange of gifts. The speaker declares that “other generous men give all kinds of outer things; but you, sweet Jesus, so gave yourself for me that you did not know how to withhold your heart’s blood. Lover never gave lover a richer love-gift [*druri*]” (249).⁶² Such a gift demands an equally generous gift in return.⁶³ Though the anchoress acknowledges her inability to match what Christ has given, she offers all that she has at the dramatic conclusion of the text: “Lord, how can I repay you for all that you have given me? what can I suffer for you for all that you have suffered for me? Ah, you must be easy to pay! A wretched body and a weak one I bear over earth—and that, such as it is, I have given and will give to your service” (256).⁶⁴ Freely consenting, voicing her vows, and giving her body to Christ as *druri*, the reader of the *Wooing* could thus fulfill the elements of the marriage contract.

In short, what I am suggesting is that the first half of the *Wooing*, considered in the field of legal marriage to Christ, is more than the fanciful soliloquy it seems. Playful love talk certainly surrounds and infuses it. But when read by an anchoress, this text could also become a serious act—a performative utterance in the Austinian sense, possessing a powerful legal function.⁶⁵ These words did not simply describe an existing state of affairs: like other illocutionary acts, they made something, did something, brought something into being. Wishing to unite herself to Christ, an anchoress could read this work and thereby enact a valid marriage to him.

Or could she? While the speaker clearly affirms, in many passages, that Christ is her chosen one and spouse, she hesitates elsewhere, as if their union had yet to be accomplished. For all its exuberance, there is a strong undercurrent of anxiety running through the first half of the text. The marriage made here still has a strongly conditional cast: like the weddings enacted through rites of consecration, it is predicated on the fulfillment of an “if.” As we have seen, the rites present this condition in very general terms (“ut sponsa Dei voceris, si ei fideliter servieris”; “ut ... si in eo permanseris, in perpetuum coroneris”).⁶⁶ Here, it has an unmistakable emotive quality. “If I love you rightly,” the speaker declares, “you will crown me in heaven with yourself.” Or again, “You will give me all if I love you rightly.” The status of the speaker’s marriage is not yet secure, but the condition that remains to be met—“loving rightly”—sounds so vague as to have nothing to do with the law. But if we move once again from text to context, it appears that “loving rightly” was indeed an urgent legal necessity, one that arose from the *sponsa Christi*’s unusual marital predicament.

That predicament was one of proof. In the case of ordinary marriages, consummation often functioned as proof that a marriage had been made; despite the fact that canon law considered it inessential, in practice it often served to ratify a *desponsatio* or a simple expression of present consent. But

consummation was not an immediate option for the spouse of Christ. Nor could the obvious alternative—the lifelong preservation of virginity as a sign of fidelity to Christ—necessarily function as proof, for the very definition of virginity grew ever more ambiguous during precisely this period. Increasingly, it was cast as a quality of the will rather than a potentially verifiable condition of the body.⁶⁷ Virgins, the theorists observed, might be virgins for the wrong reasons. Nunneries and anchorholds, after all, often functioned as places of refuge in times of crisis or simply as places for living out a life in a world with few options; a woman could thus possess the title *sponsa Christi* and remain a lifelong virgin, yet have little or no internal commitment to the meanings of those signs.⁶⁸ The widespread recognition that virginity was not sufficient was accompanied by an equally unsettling notion: that it was not even a strictly necessary prerequisite for becoming a true bride of Christ. Many widows or sexually experienced women entered the convent, and the fact that they were not virgins does not appear to have been regarded as a categorical impediment to marriage to Christ. Thus, even *Holy Maidenhood*, adamant as it is in its demand that *sponsae Christi* defend their virginity, asserts that this is not enough: “So, blessed maiden, spouse of God’s Son,” the author writes, “do not trust too much in your maidenhood alone” (242).⁶⁹

If the preservation of virginity was neither necessary nor sufficient, what could constitute proof for the *sponsa Christi*? Official sites of legal theorizing—legal canons, the records of ecclesiastical courts, and theological writings—appear to be silent on the matter. But in writings for and by religious women, what often emerges is the same simple formulation that we hear in the *Wooing of Our Lord*: “true love” makes a true *sponsa Christi*. The *Ancrene Wisse* puts it simply: “Stretch out your love to Jesus Christ, and you have won him” (197).⁷⁰ Mechthild of Hackeborn’s *Book of Ghostly Grace* and Mechthild of Magdeburg’s *Flowing Light of the Godhead* are each marked by an intense desire to awaken desire itself, as if it were the necessary task of the bride of Christ to feel.⁷¹

The writings of Gertrude the Great bring this logic into particularly sharp focus. Gertrude explicitly and persistently presents the pure and loving heart as the attribute that will distinguish the true *sponsa* from the false at the hour of death, especially in her *Exercise of Espousals and Consecration*.⁷² This exercise takes the form of the liturgy of consecration, interspersed with prayers of Gertrude’s invention and imagined dialogues between Christ and the true bride. It begins with this preface: “This is the way in which thou shalt solemnize the spiritual wedlock, the marriage of love, the betrothal, and the nuptials [copulationem] of thy chaste soul with Jesus the heavenly Bridegroom in the deathless bond of thy heart’s affection.”⁷³ The editors of Gertrude’s text assume that the function of this exercise is commemorative: that is, that it was intended to be recited on the anniversary of the *sponsa*’s consecration in celebration and gratitude for that

important day. But a careful reading reveals that it does not present the *sponsa's* marriage as a *fait accompli* to be celebrated; for here too, there is a strong sense that the process of marrying Christ has not been completed, even though the rite of consecration has been observed. More is required to complete this union. And what Gertrude returns to with insistence and urgency is this: love is the condition that must be met. Indeed the *Exercise* begins with a strong statement of this condition, presented in the voice of Christ himself and drawing on the emotive force of the language of the *Song of Songs*: "She therefore who wisheth to give Me her heart's affection, she it is whom I will betroth unto Myself; unto her will I give My affection, and I will love her ardently.... O My dove, My beloved, if thou dost wish to be Mine, thou must needs love Me sweetly, wisely, and strongly."⁷⁴ This statement of the need to love with the full powers of the heart motivates the prayers that follow. "O Thou who art the searcher of hearts," begins one plea to Christ, "let me seek to be pleasing unto Thee rather in heart than in body. Then I shall be numbered amongst the wise maids and await the heavenly Bridegroom with lamp alight and oil prepared."⁷⁵ And to be "pleasing in heart" means, for Gertrude, having a heart that moves fully and generously toward the beloved in an effort to be one with his heart. Verbs of cleaving, enclosing, and adhering predominate, as when she asks the Holy Spirit to "join my heart for ever unto Jesus," or asks Christ himself to give her the grace to "cleave unto Thee by a deathless bond," or even asks for him to fasten her heart in his as if with a kind of glue: "May Thy love carry away my heart into Thee, that by a deathless bond I may cleave unto Thee" (*ut glutino inseparabili adhaeream*).⁷⁶

Clearly, Gertrude not only draws on the *Song of Songs* but also revels in imagery that sounds strikingly similar to that of contemporary poetry of romantic love.⁷⁷ Yet this is more than mystical poetry; another linguistic register is operating here as well. Gertrude insists on the juridical character of her bond with Christ. It is a *foedus*, a legal compact: "Let the marriage contract [*foedus*] whereupon Thou hast entered with me so steal from me my heart, that it may be with me no longer but abide with Thee in a union of deathless love."⁷⁸ Even more significantly, Gertrude treats the term *amor* itself with technical specificity: she uses the phrases *amor sponsali*, "spousal love," or *amor nuptialis foederis*, "love of a nuptial compact."⁷⁹ And the ardent and frequent *exercise* of this love is presented as the necessary proof of the validity of the *sponsa's* marriage, an offering that will reciprocate Christ's proof of love in the Passion.⁸⁰

Such talk of love is indeed romantic and for this very reason may seem farfetched as legal discourse to modern ears. But I suggest that in speaking of the need to "love rightly" or to prove their "spousal love," both religious women and the men who advised them are participating in the development of a concept that was discussed quite seriously in canon law during the

twelfth and thirteenth centuries: *maritalis affectio*, or marital affection.⁸¹ John Noonan observes that the term *maritalis affectio* first emerged in Roman law to mean “intent to marry,” and it came into play primarily as a means of distinguishing marriage from concubinage. While the word *affectio* means something like “will,” “willing disposition,” or “state of mind” in this early usage, Noonan notes that it seems to have acquired an emotional resonance similar to the English *affection* or *love* by the time Justinian’s Code appeared in 529. Justinian does not specifically define *affectio*. His use of the term, however, implies that it is “not simply a legal will but an emotion-colored intent not far from love”; in certain later Roman legislation preserved in the code, *affectio* has “an emotional tone; it means liking, inclination, fondness for” (487–88). Moreover, in a key passage from the code, the term is distinguished from consent but held to be equally necessary. “What ‘marital affection’ indicated,” Noonan writes, “was the need for a certain quality of consent, the need for a certain state of willing mind. In other words, consent was not consent to intercourse, cohabitation, or acceptance of the other person. It was consent to have the other as spouse, and this quality of the will was what was meant by marital affection” (486–87). The concept was taken up with renewed interest in the twelfth century by Gratian. At certain points in the *Decretum*, Gratian seems to suggest that if consent makes a marriage, marital affection makes consent.⁸² On marriage entered into without dowry or priestly blessing, for instance, he writes that the union must be considered ratified if the spouses “contemning all those solemnities couple themselves to one another as spouses with affection alone” (491). Moreover, marital affection did not necessarily involve the intent to consummate the union; when considering the case of Mary and Joseph, Gratian considered an “affection of undivided mind” to function as a substitute for consummation.⁸³ In the papal Decretals that, along with Gratian, formed the core of medieval canon law, popes Alexander III and Innocent III affirmed and extended the concept: it now became the measure of the continuing validity of the marriage and, as such, a disposition that both spouses had a duty to cultivate through a lifetime.⁸⁴ But the canonists faced serious problems of proof: how could the existence of marital affection be known? External signs of all kinds—even declarations of love witnessed by many—could not be taken as accurate representations of inner disposition; as Aquinas articulated the problem in a different context, “God alone knows interior affection.”⁸⁵

Because of this evidentiary difficulty, the concept of marital affection gained limited currency in ecclesiastical courts.⁸⁶ Studies of medieval marriage have thus tended to assume that, while it is interesting as a legal idea, it did not acquire significant vitality in the context of social practice. My reading of the evidence, however, suggests that as an affective, volitional imperative, *maritalis affectio* was indeed lived out in practice—in full, vibrant, and complex ways—in the context of the *sponsa Christi*’s marriage.

In speaking of the necessity of “true love,” or *amor sponsalis*, religious women and those who advised them appear to be describing a version of marital affection that has relevance to their particular legal predicament. Indeed we might expect that this would be the context in which the concept would be more fully elaborated than in any other place in medieval culture. After all, the problem that prevented the standard of marital affection from being applied in the evaluation of ordinary marriages—the recognition that only God can know interior affection—was clearly not an obstacle for the *sponsa Christi*. Rather, it would appear to be a promising premise: if God, the ultimate judge of the validity of a *sponsa*’s marriage, sees and knows the state of the heart, the bride of Christ need only prove her affection to him alone. The transparency of her situation—the awareness that Christ is, as Gertrude puts it, the “searcher of hearts”—would make evidentiary problems irrelevant in the *sponsa*’s case.⁸⁷ Yet, by the same token, she must prove her emotional worthiness to him who sees her heart. This pressure, I suggest, is why affective devotion becomes so important to religious women. And as this emotional imperative develops, it takes on greater specificity: it becomes, above all, the need to open the heart to compassion for Christ in his aspect as suffering victim, dying on the cross.

Why the focus on compassion as proof of love? The canonists had gestured toward the importance of compassion as one aspect of marital affection in their consideration of ordinary marriages, commanding spouses to continue to serve and love each other even when one is seriously ill or suffering. In several cases brought before Alexander III, for instance, the serious illness or suffering of one spouse threatened to divide the couple. In ordering the healthy spouse to continue to serve and love the other, Alexander advances a definition of *maritalis affectio* that includes compassion. The most important of Alexander’s decretals on this subject is *Perveniens*. Addressed to the Archbishop of Canterbury, the letter takes up the problem of lepers abandoned by their spouses. In it, Alexander advises the Archbishop “to exhort, not compel, the spouses (whether husband or wife) to follow their sick consorts and to ‘minister to them with conjugal affection.’”⁸⁸ As Noonan observes, “it was clear that intercourse was not at issue. What was being recommended was a tender loving attitude which would result in the care appropriate to one spouse being tendered by the other spouse.”⁸⁹ But while this specifically compassionate love is a minor variation of the theme in discussions of ordinary marriage, it is absolutely central for the *sponsa Christi*. The reason for this is simple. The fact of Christ’s crucifixion was the fixed event in this story, the given that functioned as the starkest proof of love imaginable. Thus, in addition to loving Christ in ways presumed to come naturally and easily—with tender affection for him in his infancy, or with passionate desire for him in his manly beauty—the *sponsa* was called on to demonstrate her reciprocal love through something as intense and hard-

won as the Passion itself: through deeply felt *compassion*.

This logic is embedded in abundant writings for nuns and recluses. In a letter from Adam of Persigny to a certain Margaret, for example, Adam assumes that Margaret is prepared to advance from one kind of love, affectionate “play” with “Christ in the cradle,” to the more mature compassionate love that her role as spouse demands: she is “now ready to be crucified with Christ.”⁹⁰ Adam defines participation in Christ’s sufferings as the difficult but necessary “consummation” of the *sponsa*’s marriage: “For indeed if you do not refuse to copulate with your husband on such a bed, you shall achieve one day the glory of a nuptial bed which knows nothing of cross or pain.”⁹¹ Such language raises the question whether ascetic practices or compassionate feelings are at issue—a question that becomes all the more compelling when we recall how pervasive ascetic practices are among female religious and how infused and surrounded by marital rhetoric and imagery. Clare’s life, for example, conforms to the pattern described in the previous pages in ways that have not yet been recognized: her flight from her father’s home, her writings, her canonization process, even the desperation of her pleas to the papal curia for the “privilege of poverty” appear to register a profound understanding of marriage to Christ as a legal bond demanding continual striving, continual proof.⁹² Meditation on the Passion seems to have been an affective exercise Clare engaged in daily. Yet the most assertive evidence of Clare’s striving is the intensity of her ascetic practices. It is chiefly these practices that are spoken of as what will earn her the title *sponsa Christi* on her death. But on closer inspection, Clare’s gestures and words embody an assumption, one not unique to her but widespread in medieval culture: the assumption that actions and emotions are of a piece, that actions both produce and reflect emotion—a mode that has been described as the “externalization” of emotion.⁹³ Thus, the *vita* written for the occasion of Clare’s canonization process ultimately frames her ascetic practices as affective gestures or, in other words, iterations of marital affection conceived of as compassion.⁹⁴

In other cases, however, the logic of marital affection as compassion has a more plainly visible emotional cast. One chapter, “The Usefulness of Remembering Christ’s Passion,” in Gertrude’s *Herald of God’s Loving-Kindness* seems to define that “usefulness” as an exercise in juridically motivated compassionate feeling that will make the *sponsa Christi* worthy of her spouse. Gertrude even frames this affective logic in a parable in which Christ himself speaks of the “law of marriage”:

The Lord bent down with his most benevolent loving-kindness and said to her, “According to the law of marriage, it is appropriate that a king should hasten to see his queen, wherever she has been confined by sickness.” Through these words she understood that the Lord out of his loving-kindness sees himself as much bound to the soul that

constantly keeps in mind with devotion the remembrance of his Passion as far as she can, as a king is bound to a queen by the law of marriage. For she recognized that she earned this most courteous visitation of the Lord because she was eager to recall the Lord's Passion on Fridays. She also understood that however lukewarm she became in her devotion, none the less the Lord would always look kindly on her if she did not forget to honor the remembrance of the Passion.⁹⁵

A similar logic infuses the Middle English anchoritic texts. As we have seen, these works define "true love" as the quality that will earn the *sponsa* her nuptial crown, and on closer inspection, the form true love takes is that of compassion. The pain-as-gain formula found so frequently in religious writings is, in these texts, defined and framed more specifically as a formula for marriagemaking.⁹⁶ This is particularly clear in the *vitae* of the virgin martyrs Juliana, Margaret, and Katherine. In these versions of their lives, exemplary martyrdoms have been transformed, deliberately and systematically, into exemplary *marriages*: it is pain—pain experienced affectively as love—that makes these marriages "true."⁹⁷ As Juliana tells her tormentors, "I'll be so much the dearer to him ... the more bitter the things I suffer for his love.... So I'll cheerfully and with happy heart suffer every torment for my beloved's love, the lovely Lord."⁹⁸ The *Life of St. Katherine* ends with a clear sign that the pain she has suffered has demonstrated the depth of her marital love. Her entry into heaven, like St. Clare's, is staged as the moment of final acceptance by Christ as spouse: "Come my dear lover, come now my spouse, dearest of women!"⁹⁹ And in its final prayer, *Holy Maidenhood* asserts that ardent affective labor—a fierce cleaving of the heart to Christ—can effect for its readers what martyrdom effected for Katherine: "Grant them so to cleave their hearts to him, that neither the urging of their flesh, nor the enemy's tempting, nor any of his earthly agents may trouble the understanding of their hearts, nor wrench them out of the path they have taken; and so help them to rise in him toward heaven, until they have climbed where their marriage—in all that is always blessed, with that blessed bridegroom from whom all blessing comes—will endure without end."¹⁰⁰ The readers of the anchoritic texts were thus asked to see the willingness to participate affectively in Christ's sufferings as proof of their worthiness to be accepted as true brides.

Marriage to Christ requires marital affection, and because Christ endured the Passion for love of his *sponsa*, marital affection demands compassion. It is in light of this logic that the seemingly incongruous structure of *The Wooing of Our Lord* makes sense. Marital affection—what the speaker in the *Wooing* calls "loving rightly"—is the hinge that links the two parts of this text. The first part establishes a marital predicament. Through enacting a *desponsatio*, the speaker becomes Christ's spouse; yet this marriage is still

conditional, for it is not and cannot be consummated. To this predicament, the Passion meditation of the second part offers a solution. For it is now possible to see it as a different but equally necessary form of legalism: the words scripted here become the vehicle for cultivating compassion in the *sponsa's* heart, thus deepening the quality of marital affection and aiding in the enactment of her marriage to Christ. Moreover, the stylistic features of this half of the *Wooing*, including the driving, emotion-heightening rhythm for which the work is celebrated, are crucial to the work the Passion meditation needs to do. Together they lead the speaker ever more deeply into the experience of sharing the dying Christ's agony: "Ah! ... Now my heart can break apart, my eyes all overflow with water. Ah! now is my lover condemned to die! ... Ah! How can I live for pity?" (254–55).¹⁰¹ This script for the performance of emotion culminates in an impassioned response to what has been witnessed and felt: "Ah! sweet Jesus.... Wrong would it be to refuse you my heart, since you have bought heart with heart.... What can I suffer for you for all that you have suffered for me? ... My body will hang with your body, nailed on the cross, fastened, transfixed within four walls" (255–56).¹⁰² This compassionate identification with Christ on the cross, this total union of affect and will is, for the *sponsa Christi*, the equivalent of consummation. But unlike consummation, it is not enough for this event to be experienced once: what is demanded is iterative affective performance.

We have now come full circle—to the *Wooing's* colophon and rubrics, which invite frequent use, and to the partial effacement of the text of the Passion meditation. It appears that this text was intended—and actually used—as an instrument in a lifelong process of marriage-making: each time the *sponsa* enters into the affective role scripted for her here, she moves one step closer to becoming Christ's true bride, a title that can only be confirmed after death. Only then can she be "crowned," as she puts it, by her bridegroom, her marriage made secure.

In addition to illuminating the *Wooing's* unifying principle, the concept of marital affection makes sense of the text's title, which is rendered in simple, unglossed form in the manuscript. The prevailing assumption has been that this title refers to Christ's wooing of his beloved—and thus that the text itself derives from the lover-knight allegory in the *Ancrene Wisse*. But Christ is not the active agent in this text. It is the *sponsa's* wooing of Christ that is the issue. Christ has already proven his absolute worthiness to be chosen as spouse; it remains for her to prove her worthiness to Christ. Reading this work and performing the compassion it demands becomes a means of wooing him, of demonstrating to him that she deserves to be his bride. Indeed, the grammatical form of the word *wohunge*—a verbal noun—perfectly captures the sense of continual striving that is required of her in this life as Christ's betrothed. To the potential objection here that only men woo in the Middle Ages, I would point out that the "wooing woman" did indeed have her day in the sun at exactly this time in England: she surfaces

in both Anglo-Norman and Middle English romances of the thirteenth century—in figures such as Rymenhild, who falls passionately in love with Horn, invites him into her chamber, leads him to her bed, gives him wine, initiates embraces and kisses, and proposes marriage.¹⁰³

A FRAMEWORK FOR AFFECTIVE DEVOTION

“Every frontier, every critical line where two separate cultures, two systems of law, two social organizations, both meet and separate presents a heightened tension, intensified colours, a sense of drama the settled hinterlands do not know.”¹⁰⁴ Ellis Peters is generalizing here, but the basis for extrapolation is her survey of the Welsh Marches, where the *Wooing* was written. This comment is acutely apt for the thirteenth century—when the borderlands were fiercely contested, legal systems clashed, and marriage politics were seen as a primary mechanism for stabilizing and accruing power.¹⁰⁵ Consent and its implicit protections for women could quickly be overridden in lands where the political stakes were so high. Any woman of noble birth was apt to be especially powerless in such a world. The women for whom the *Wooing* and related anchoritic texts were written appear to have come from families of high rank in this region.¹⁰⁶ Worth recalling in this context is Dobson’s conclusion that the original anchoresses lived near Wigmore, in an anchorhold whose primary patron was Roger of Wigmore, a key player in Marcher politics.¹⁰⁷ A passage from Psalm 68 quoted in the *Wooing* could thus have had topical as well as timeless significance: “Now, my sweet Jesus, I have left for your love the kinship of the flesh; and besides, my born brothers have thrown me aside” (251).¹⁰⁸

High-born women of this region, then, were vulnerable, and because of this, marriage law is likely to have mattered to them. These lands had an excess of legal systems: Welsh law; canon law; English civil law; and “the law of the Marches,” a set of exemptions granted by the English king to the Marcher lords because of their exceptional circumstances—and the exceptional need for strategic behavior. These lords needed to be able to bend the law to their expedient wishes, and the making of marriages appears to have been one place where such bending happened.¹⁰⁹ These pressures would have virtually guaranteed that “law” would be a highly relevant, deeply personal subject for women belonging to powerful families in this region; it would have been something they thought about. The very clash, overlay, excess of legal systems would have conveyed a sense of law as something unstable—in flux, provisional, to be drawn on selectively or reinvented for strategic purposes.

In general, this climate of hyperlegality is likely to have worked against the interests of noblewomen; whether or not they were compliant with familial wishes, the stark fact remains that their will was irrelevant as their bodies and futures were given to men not of their choosing. But the rich

legal stew in the Marches may have piqued a special interest in legal marriage to Christ. The anchorhold, after all, would have afforded a kind of material protection, not simply material deprivation. Nuns were regularly abducted from convents in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; having oneself walled up in a cell could make abduction impossible.¹¹⁰ However, it is because enclosure offered safety at this very pragmatic level—and was thus potentially self-serving in a way that has not been fully recognized—that inner disposition would be so important to prove to Christ. This explains, in very local and specific terms, why there would be a perceived need to distinguish “true” anchoress from the false, the “false” being those who are merely seeking protection from the harsh political realities of this time in the Marches. Place, then, matters. Where the specificity of the *Wooing*’s character as text is concerned, it matters—in the profound and shaping way Christopher Cannon has recently delineated. In one sense, the argument I have made about the *Wooing* could stand as further support for the claims Cannon makes for the *sui generis* character of much Early Middle English literature, for the way such texts issue from their particular “grounds.”¹¹¹

Yet it is important to emphasize here my larger claim: that the *Wooing* is paradigmatic. If my reconstruction of the logic of this text and the logic of the field is sound, it has important implications for understanding the meaning and function of a much wider range of medieval meditations on the Passion, including those of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and many devotional practices and visual images as well. Ongoing work on gender and devotion continues to demonstrate that affective participation in Christ’s sufferings was practiced by women with exceptional fervor and frequency—with a kind and degree of motivation, in other words, that often differed from that evinced by men. The interpretive framework I have sketched here provides a new explanation for this pattern. Men, since they could not enter into legal marriage to Christ, were not subject to the kinds of affective pressures experienced by religious women, nor offered the array of heavenly rewards that made such suffering sweet. Women had far greater incentive to cultivate compassion for the suffering Christ. In doing so, they could, as *Holy Maidenhood* puts it, “climb where their marriage ... with that blessed bridegroom from whom all blessing comes—will endure without end.”¹¹²

In conclusion, I offer just one example from the visual arts of the broad utility this new paradigm might have for the study of affect and gender in the late medieval period. A very telling illustration of “climbing” toward legal marriage through the practice of compassion appears in the *Rothschild Canticles*, made for female religious circa 1300 (Figure 1). As Jeffrey Hamburger has observed, the central image can be interpreted as any soul—any Christian *anima* or allegorical *sponsa*—climbing the cross; she “stands for the souls of individual believers.”¹¹³ Hamburger notes that the “grasping gesture with which Christ greets the Wise Virgins ... is a standard motif in illustrations of spiritual progress, signifying the spiritual ascent or even the

act of vision itself.”¹¹⁴ But it seems to me that this gesture has an additional, and in this context more immediate and urgent, significance: Christ is drawing the Wise Virgin to himself as true, legal *sponsa*. To see this, it is important to recognize that the climbing *sponsa* is not simply any *anima*; she has a specific social identity. She is a nun, as can be seen from her veil. Moreover, the pictorial rhetoric framing the crucifix appears to indicate that literal marriage to Christ is a primary, if not the primary, theme of the image. On one side, Foolish Virgins enter the mouth of hell. On the other, Wise Virgins receive the crown of marriage while Christ grasps the *sponsa*’s hand, using the legally significant gesture of the *dextrarum iunctio*. These alternatives set up the pressing questions we have seen in the *Wooing* and elsewhere. What distinguishes the Wise Virgin from the Foolish? How can a true *sponsa* gain acceptance by Christ as his true bride? Framed in this way, the central image provides an answer to these questions. The climbing nun in the center signifies the process that nuns must undergo to distinguish themselves as worthy of being welcomed by the hand of the bridegroom at the hour of death. That process is the constant striving to join Christ on his cross, to participate affectively in his sufferings.



Figure 1. A nun climbs the cross, ca. 1300. The Rothschild Canticles. New Haven, Beinecke MS 404, f. 15r. Reproduced courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

As we will see, later texts in the tradition of affective meditation, including such landmark texts as the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes*

vitae Christi and the English writings of Richard Rolle, are framed by language that links the practice of compassion to marriage making. But instead of traveling forward at this juncture, I wish to move back in time, to the late eleventh century. For, equipped with this new lens, we are now in a position to see another important aspect of the history of medieval compassion: the origins of affective devotion itself.



The Genealogy of a Genre

“HOW DID IT HAPPEN,” Émile Mâle asked in his early and influential study of religious art, “that, in the fourteenth century, Christians wished to see their God suffer and die? ... Who had released this gushing spring? Who had thus struck the Church in its very heart? This problem, one of the most interesting presented by the history of Christianity, has never been resolved, nor, to tell the truth, has it ever been clearly posed.”¹ The problem is one of the most interesting not only in the history of Christianity but also in the history of emotion. For even though Mâle’s remarks were made over a century ago, the emergence of the history of emotion as a distinct field of study gives his poignant questions a renewed timeliness. No longer content with investigating the synchronic historicity of affect, researchers in this field have turned to explorations of the diachronic, asking how specific emotional constructs are invented, how they begin to be adopted by individuals and identifiable emotional communities, how they can even issue in large-scale “revolutions in feeling.”²

Where the emergence of compassion for the suffering Christ is concerned, a compelling story has until recently substituted for a sustained and detailed investigation of origins. That story sees essentially two stages: in the first, Anselm of Canterbury (preceded by his slightly older compatriot, John of Fécamp) and Bernard of Clairvaux invented and developed a novel kind of affective prayer; in the second, Francis of Assisi and his Order reinvented it, promoting compassionate devotion to the Passion with unprecedented zeal and bringing it out of the cloister into the world. The broad change in sentiment in medieval Christianity is thus reflexively called the Anselmian, Bernardine, or Franciscan “revolution,” while the emotion of compassion itself is regularly referred to as Anselmian, Cistercian, or Franciscan.³ Qualifications are rarely lacking; such characterizations are often accompanied by the acknowledgment that the story is not so simple.⁴ But the towering figures of Anselm, Bernard, and Francis have so dominated this narrative that the sheer attraction it holds—as story—might well be suspected of exerting the kind of mythic pull Edward Said has described: “In dealing with a distant past, the mind prefers contemplating a strong seminal figure to sifting through reams of explanation.”⁵

Recently, however, a major contribution has been made toward

illuminating with far greater precision and rigor the period from 800 to 1200. In her groundbreaking study *From Judgment to Passion*, Rachel Fulton advances a new explanation for the first phase of affective devotion. Fulton argues that widespread apocalyptic disappointment following the year 1033, when Christ was expected to return in Judgment, served as the chief “catalyst” of the change in emotional attitudes toward Christ and his Passion. Talented thinkers and writers, beginning with John of Fécamp and followed by Anselm himself, absorbed these attitudes, gave them an intellectual foundation, and—in the crucible of their own contemplative practices—transmuted them into a novel kind of prayer. These prayers were then copied and disseminated throughout Europe, and the circulation of these texts ultimately produced a widespread change in religious sentiment.

In this chapter, I will advance a different narrative. Women, I will argue, were instrumental to this shift in sensibility at the very beginning. From one point of view, to ask whether affective devotion originated as a practice among women seems a modest ambition. The abundant scholarship on women and religion during the past two decades has made such a gesture virtually inevitable, inviting closer scrutiny of the suggestive leads made in some of the standard studies of medieval spirituality.⁶ Yet from another perspective, the question is daring—for Fulton has explicitly rejected the hypothesis that women played a significant, generative role in the origins of affective devotion. Indeed, Fulton argues that gender itself can often be a misleading category of analysis. Instead of thinking in terms of “men” and “women,” she writes, it is better to deal in “particulars”: “If—I would insist—we are to understand the origins and development of this devotion, we must deal in particulars, not generalities, with gendered human beings ... not simply ‘gender.’”⁷

It is a vexed question, then, I wish to take up; and, as with any attempt to investigate origins, there is ample room for error.⁸ Nonetheless, I seek to initiate more serious attention to the claim that women were instrumental to the origins of affective devotion by approaching the question from the angle of a literary critic and historian: for whom were the earliest and most influential texts in this tradition written?⁹

A simple list is in order here. If we were to set aside paternal genealogies and the presumed primacy of the author for a moment, what we could see is an alternative genealogy for the landmark texts in the affective tradition: a generic kinship of texts written for or first sent to women dedicated to the religious life.¹⁰ Such texts include the *Libellus* addressed to Agnes of Poitou and an unknown nun by John of Fécamp, circa 1060; the collection of impassioned prayers Anselm first sent to the recluse Adelaide, circa 1081, and later, with many more prayers added, in what would become the definitive collection of the *Prayers and Meditations*, to Matilda of Tuscany in 1104; the *Liber confortatorius*, written for Eve of Wilton by Goscelin, circa 1080; and the first extended affective meditations on the Passion, those

incorporated into the *Rule of Life for a Recluse*, circa 1160–62, written for a recluse by her brother, Aelred of Rievaulx. In the thirteenth century, this tradition includes the Passion material in Edmund of Abingdon's compendium, *Mitour de Seint Eglyse*, which appears to have been written for "dames religieuses"; the *Quis dabit*, addressed to "daughters of Jerusalem, beloved brides of God," probably by Ogier of Locedio; *The Wooing of Our Lord*; and the Passion section of *On the Perfection of Life, Addressed to Sisters*, written by Bonaventure for a convent of Poor Clares, circa 1260. Early fourteenth-century texts include the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, written by Heinrich Seuse for nuns, almost certainly for Elsbet Stagel and the convent of Töss; the Passion lyrics of Richard Rolle embedded in the *Ego Dormio*, written for the recluse Margaret Kirkby, as well as at least one of the long prose *Meditations* attributed to him in the manuscripts;¹¹ and, finally, the text so often described as the paradigmatic work of affective meditation, the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi*, written for a Poor Clare sometime between about 1336 and 1364.¹²

In addition to the sheer length of this list, there are theoretical models through which the shaping force of audience in the production of literary texts can be recognized. Readers are always to some degree participants in the author-function of texts and instrumental to the birth of new genres.¹³ As Hans Robert Jauss put it in his foundational work on the subject, "the historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees."¹⁴ By this he does not mean that an audience is only important after the fact of a text's creation: "In the triangle of author, work, and public the last is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but rather itself an energy formative of history."¹⁵ This is true because a text's addressees inevitably have a "horizon of expectations" that often govern an author's fundamental generic and thematic choices in the process of composition.¹⁶ This horizon of expectations not only operates in the production of individual texts; new literary genres arise out of its hidden imperatives. As Jauss puts it, "the new formation or the death of literary forms—ultimately, indeed, every turn in the history of genres—must have a correspondence in the sociohistorical situation, or at least an impulse arising from it."¹⁷ Because Jauss formulated his theory of generic formation by looking closely at medieval texts in particular, his call to consider the generative role of readers seems particularly apt where medieval genres are concerned. More significantly still, the medieval genre at issue here is profoundly utilitarian: prayers and meditations are meant to be *used* by their readers, which suggests that Jauss's model is even more fitting, when applied to this category of literary texts, than it is when the genre at hand is designed primarily for entertainment or edification.

We have, then, a list, a model, and, through the argument of the previous chapter, a historically specific motive: the desire among female religious to enact a legal marriage to Christ, a goal made newly possible in the latter half

of the eleventh century with the emergence of legal thinking more broadly. Equipped with these, I will turn now to an exploration of exemplary instances of women and origins. Because I too believe, like Fulton, that the very close study of the “particulars” is essential (even if a discussion of the details may at times try the patience of readers), I will focus my analysis around two meditative works, one in this chapter, the other in the next. In this chapter, I take up the earliest known text to exemplify the new affective mode, John of Fécamp’s *Libellus*; in [Chapter 3](#), I discuss the work widely held to epitomize the genre, the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi*. I have chosen these texts not only for the early date of the former and the influence of the latter, but also because each has been brought into the story of origins in ways that have served to reinforce the paternal genealogies of those origins: the first as a forerunner of “Anselmian” devotion, the second as “Franciscan.”

My objective in offering a new story of origins is not to argue that women “deserve the credit” for inventing medieval compassion; indeed, as numerous critiques have shown, this would be a dubious honor: compassionate feeling is neither straightforwardly positive as an affective experience for those feeling it nor innocent in its social effects.¹⁸ Rather, by further elucidating origins in all their complexity, including their gendered dimensions (and surely the site of origins is capacious enough to admit multiple explanations), the structures and operations of compassion itself as a medieval emotional regime, no less than the way affective meditations as a genre continued to operate in history in subsequent centuries, can come into clearer view.

THE *LIBELLUS* OF JOHN OF FÉCAMP

Even the most devoted students of medieval devotion can be forgiven for not having read John of Fécamp’s *Libellus de scripturis et verbis patrum collectus, ad eorum praesertim utilitatem qui contemplativae sunt amatores* (*Little Book of Extracts from the Scriptures and Words of the Fathers, Especially Useful for Those Who Are Lovers of Contemplation*). Despite its historical importance, the Latin text has never been critically edited, and the only translation into a modern vernacular circulates under the name of Augustine and is larded with many chapters that John of Fécamp did not write.¹⁹ Even if a reliable text and translation were available, the significance of the *Libellus* would not be immediately obvious, since most of the work has little to do with the Passion. The chapters that make up the bulk of the book are chiefly about heaven; they depict scenes of what John calls the “heavenly Jerusalem” and, drawing on much of Augustine’s impassioned language and that of the psalms, seek to stir up longing for that place and for union with God there. It is primarily the four prayers at the end of the *Libellus* that reveal a new emotional impulse and the beginnings of generic change.

Of these, the fourth and final prayer is widely acknowledged as the most significant. It marks a distinct change in both content and tone from prayers known to be in circulation before the mid-eleventh century.²⁰ Framed by the language of spousal love, it assumes an ease, an intimacy, a loving and secure bond with Christ, even as it scripts pleas to share in his suffering through intense, affective wounding:

By the saving wounds which you suffered on the cross for our salvation and from which flowed the precious blood of our redemption, wound this sinful soul of mine for which you were willing even to die; wound it with the fiery and powerful dart of your charity that is beyond compare.

You are the living Word of God, effectual and more piercing than any two-edged sword. You are the choice arrow and sharpest of swords, so powerful that you can penetrate the tough shield of the human heart: pierce my heart, then, with the dart of your love, so that my soul may say, “I have been wounded by your love,” and abundant tears may flow day and night from this wound of your rich love.

Strike, Lord, strike this hard heart of mine with the sharp spear of your love and by your power pierce deep into my inmost self.

Grant me an abundant source of water and make my eyes a real fountain of ever-flowing tears that spring from a great longing and desire for the vision of your beauty. Then I shall accept no consolations of this present life but shall weep day and night until I am able to see you, my God and my Lord, my beloved and beautiful spouse, in your heavenly chamber. When I see your glorious and wonderful and beautiful and most sweet face, then, with your chosen ones, I shall humbly adore your majesty and, filled at last with the ineffable heavenly joy of everlasting jubilation, I shall cry out with those who love you:

“Now I see what I longed to see; now I possess what I hoped to possess; now I have what I yearned to have! I am united now in heaven to him whom, when I was on earth, I loved with all my strength and embraced with all my love. I cleaved to him with all my heart [*Cui toto amore inhaesi*]; now I praise, bless, and adore him who lives and reigns as God for endless ages. Amen.”²¹

The image of Christ’s wounded body is glanced at only obliquely here; it is not the central feature of the prayer, as it is in so many late medieval affective writings. But the yearning to identify with Christ through compassionate love is unmistakable. Though sin is indeed mentioned—“wound this sinful soul of mine”—the prayer is not fundamentally an expression of repentance or an attempt to produce guilt. Here it is love that motivates the desire to share compassionately in Christ’s sufferings, and an

even more intimate love that is the expected outcome. In the landscape of eleventh-century prayer—still dominated by emotions of fear and guilt—this is indeed striking. What can account for this difference in emotional tenor? What is the source of the sentiments written here?

The scholarship has long held that the source is John's own heart, that these words record John's own deep yearnings, refined through a lifetime of contemplative practice. The *Libellus*, in other words, has been assumed to be a fundamentally self-expressive text, one that represents a stage in John's lifelong spiritual itinerary as recorded in a substantial meditative corpus ranging from the *Confessio theologica*, which has been dated to the period before John became abbot of Fécamp in 1028, to the other works he composed during his fifty-year abbacy, including a body of short prayers and a *Lamentatio* expressing desire for the solitary life as exemplified by the hermits of the desert.²² André Wilmart, who "discovered" John in the 1930s by identifying his works in the pseudo-Augustinian and Anselmian collections in which they had been embedded anonymously for centuries, was the first to characterize these writings as self-expressive.²³ Noting the "ardent sincerity" of John's meditations, Wilmart suggests that they reflect "spontaneous prayer, written in secret and as if under the gaze of God."²⁴ Wilmart was quick to admit another possibility: that some of John's works may have been produced as solicited redactions for others. But even those redactions, in Wilmart's view, had their ultimate source in John's heartfelt colloquys with God. Wilmart imagines the process thus: "One can easily understand that a gifted writer might be led to cast the effusions of his intimate prayer [*les effusions de sa prière intime*] into the frame of a literary genre. It suffices that, around him, someone finds out about these private compositions, and recognizes the interest they hold for edification. A text circulates and finds some admirers. One invites the responsible author to place himself in the view of the public; one even furnishes him with themes to treat. It is thus that saint Anselm composed his prayers at the request of his friends."²⁵ This model of composition, with its characterization of John's meditations as "intimate effusions" and its anchoring in the more familiar case of Anselm, has had a firm hold on the scholarship up to the present day. Jean Leclercq and Jean-Paul Bonnes, in the influential introductory essay to their edition of John's writings, confidently assert that "the works of John of Fécamp are directly linked to his personal life"; they are "intimate effusions."²⁶ The effusive, romantic style of Leclercq and Bonnes can certainly come across as dated (as when the entire genre of affective prayer through ensuing centuries is described as a "vast echo" of John's voice).²⁷ Yet the basic premise that John's meditative works are fundamentally self-expressive has been adopted without question ever since, finding renewed endorsement even in the most recent studies.²⁸

At the same time, the scholarship regularly acknowledges that John wished the *Libellus* to be read by women. John wrote two prefaces for it, and

both are addressed to female religious, one to an unnamed nun and another to Agnes, former empress of the Holy Roman Empire, who took the veil soon after the death of her husband, Henry III.²⁹ These prefaces are remarkably clear about the way John expected the *Libellus* to be used as a core part of a nun's practices. What is more, John explicitly indicates that he is aware that various categories of people have different devotional needs—and that he seeks to serve those disparate needs. His letter to Agnes, for instance, begins thus: "A certain while ago, lady empress, it pleased you to ask that I might gather from the scriptures some lucid and brief extracts in which, in addition to the laws of your order, you might be able to discern, without great difficulty, a guide for good living. Indeed *every rank, age and sex* has, in the sacred scriptures, an appropriate doctrine informing its way of life, so that each person, walking in the way to which he/she is called, may be worthy to approach the kingdom in which there are many mansions [emphasis mine]."³⁰ The scholarship on John, however, has considered these comments to be irrelevant to the question of how the *Libellus*, and in particular its novel affectivity, came into being.

Rachel Fulton has articulated this point most forcefully, arguing that we simply cannot know whether the *Libellus* was written for Agnes and the unnamed nun; all we can know is that the *Libellus* was sent to them.³¹ And at first glance the distinction Fulton draws between "written for" and "sent to," along with the default privileging of the latter, appears to be an exemplary scholarly gesture, in that it seems to exercise prudent restraint. As tempting as it might be to locate women at the point of origins, Fulton insists, we ought to resist that temptation: we simply have no license to claim so much generative power for readers. Moreover, Fulton adduces as compelling evidence the priority of the *Confessio theologica*, written several decades before the *Libellus*, issuing from John's own contemplative practices and anticipating in more diffuse, less developed form the affectivity of the *Libellus*. Comparing the two texts closely, Fulton reaches this conclusion: "Other than his brief appeal to the image of the love of a wife for her husband (and perhaps not even that), there is little indication in John's *Libellus* that he made any significant concessions to the gender of his female audience. Indeed some of the *Libellus*'s most affective passages, including those ... on Christ's love for our flesh and Christ's writing on the heart, are drawn directly from John's own *Confessio theologica*, which, there seems little reason to doubt, he wrote for his own contemplative use."³² Fulton thus locates the source of the compassionate yearnings in the *Libellus* squarely in John's heart. All we can know, in her view, is that these words reflect "John's devotion to Christ."³³ Beyond this, whether we are considering John's writings or the prayers of the more illustrious Anselm, all we can do is "speculate" or "hypothesize" or "fantasize" about the influence women may have had on the affective tenor of the earliest specimens of the genre.³⁴

Speculation, however, may be in the eye of the beholder. To date, those

who have studied the *Libellus* have been, like Fulton, historians of spirituality. But even in interdisciplinary analysis disciplinary training matters. The tools, methods, and theoretical perspectives of literary history and criticism have not yet been brought to bear on this important text. Yet from the perspective of a literary scholar, the premise that John's works are self-expressive is by no means self-evident and indeed seems on the face of it anachronistic. Far from being the more cautious and careful claim, the notion that what John's writings represent are *John's* thoughts and feelings may well be the far grander and more tenuous proposition—one for which no support has ever been offered (having been taken as a given rather than recognized as a claim) and for which there appears to be little support available in eleventh-century literary history.

What literary-historical analysis exposes is the fragility of the foundation on which the story of the origins of affective meditation currently rests. This story has been built on multiple assumptions about textual artifacts, assumptions that have been made with little regard to the historicity of basic literary phenomena: of authorship, genre, textual production, and above all a key grammatical form—the first-person singular, which figures here as an “impassioned ‘I.’” In what follows, I offer a series of realignments, proposing that the firstperson singular in John's meditations is primarily a performance position; that these prayers are less “intimate effusions” than “intimate scripts”; that the most viable model of the eleventh-century author of devotional literature is not that of the Romantic self-expressive spirit but that of a professional man of the church who, armed with rhetorical skill and charged with the care of souls, seeks to serve the needs of others—and that the gender of these others mattered.

So much has depended on the belief that the “I” in the earliest affective prayers stands in the first instance for the author. Whether the related cluster of assumptions in the scholarship (about John's role as writer, the characterization of his prayers as “intimate effusions,” and the purpose and method by which those prayers came into being) derive from or precede this understanding of the first-person singular is hard to tell. What is clear is this: it is time to open up that “I.”

THE IMPASSIONED “I” IN HISTORY

The topic of the first-person singular in eleventh- and early- twelfth-century devotional literature deserves far more attention than it has received.³⁵ The subject is rich: at stake are complex issues in the history of subjectivity, including more precise understandings of personhood and individuality, the invention of spiritual autobiography, and even what might be called (admittedly, anachronistically) a history of chutzpah; for if John's meditations are what they have been considered to be—the open and unrestrained revelation of one man's deepest, most private, most heartfelt

longings, offered to readers as exemplary—John certainly deserves a place next to the obvious giant in such a history, Augustine. Yet the sobriquet John regularly adopted as his signature in letters and legal documents—*Iohannelinus*, “Little John”—itself provides evidence of an altogether more humble stance: that of a devoted servant of the Church who sought to use his considerable pastoral energies and rhetorical skill to serve the needs of others.³⁶

John does indeed quote copiously from Augustine’s *Confessions*. This ample borrowing might seem to suggest that John is imitating Augustine in deploying an autobiographical “I.” But this conclusion would rest on a simplistic vision of what Augustine does with the first person singular in the *Confessions*, and of the way this text was interpreted, used, and adapted in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries, when it began to receive renewed attention after many centuries during which it appears to have received only a relatively modest degree of interest.³⁷ There are at least two identifiable “I”s in the *Confessions*: the auto-biographical (through which Augustine tells his life story) and an impassioned “I” that Augustine himself uses as a vehicle for prayer. It is this latter “I” that John appears to have valued in Augustine and to have imitated. John’s quotations from Augustine merge seamlessly into impassioned expressions of John’s invention—as part of a rhetorical style and a devotional strategy, as part of the making of an affectively effective script. Both Augustine and John draw on the most familiar “I” of all, in medieval prayer: the “I” of the psalms. It is this “I,” the psalmic “I,” that infuses Augustine’s impassioned rhetoric. And it is essentially this psalmic “I”—in part through Augustine, in part through copious and direct citation of the psalms, and in part through liturgical elaborations of the psalms—that John offers to his readers.

To assume that the “I” of the *Libellus* represents John is to cast that work as, in effect, a species of spiritual autobiography. But the scholarship on autobiographical writing has located the beginnings of that mode in the twelfth century, in the writings of Guibert of Nogent and Abelard, with only flashes of “autobiographical moments” before that time.³⁸ It is twelfth-century writers who begin to imitate the autobiographical “I” of Augustine’s *Confessions* by filling their texts with the particularity of personal detail (names, dates, places, events) relevant to their lives alone. The very fact that this is the method by which the beginnings of autobiography have been detected—that the task has been defined as one of isolating nontransferable self-description—would seem to define, through contrast, John’s meditations as something other than the written traces of his own devotional yearnings.³⁹

These features of literary history suggest that the “I” of the *Libellus* is at base, and not just secondarily, a role that John scripted for those he expected to make use of his book. It is a device designed to elicit feelings from its users—feelings that may well have been quite foreign to John’s own

experience of God, whatever that may have been. It is that scene, the scene of John's secret colloquys with God—so vividly imagined by Wilmart and assumed by the subsequent scholarship to have the status of an open book, available to be read from John's works—that is, as I see it, the least knowable piece of the puzzle, the least available to historical recovery or critical scrutiny. The first-person singular is a rhetorical figure: this is all that can be said with certainty where the composition of eleventh-century prayers is concerned—even when that “I” seems especially sincere, personal, or impassioned.

The very mention of those adjectives, of course, conjures Anselm, whose *Prayers and Meditations* regularly serve as the standard by which the lessfamiliar prayers of John might be understood. But even here, that standard is far less stable than has been supposed. Richard Southern's influential assessment of the *Prayers and Meditations* illustrates how easy it is to conflate the rhetorical figure of the first-person singular with the author himself. Southern was among the first to celebrate Anselm's achievement in bringing the personal into the realm of prayer. In contrast to Carolingian models, Southern observes, Anselm's prayers manifest a “fervid and personal devotion”; they introduce a “new note of personal passion” and “emotional extravagance” to private prayer.⁴⁰ And it is certainly true that the prayer for which Anselm's reputation as inventor of the new devotional mode—his “Prayer to Christ”—is replete with expressions of the kind Southern observes:

Why, O my soul, were you not there
to be pierced by a sword of bitter sorrow? ...

Why did you not see with horror
the blood that poured out of the side of your Redeemer?

... Why did you not share
the sufferings of the most pure virgin,
his worthy mother and your gentle lady?⁴¹

As Anselm expresses the desire to have stood beside Mary, witnessing how Christ was “bound, beaten and hurt,” “stretched on the cross without guilt,” and “cruelly butchered by wicked men,” he sketches before the mind's eye the pitiable images of the suffering Christ that were to become so central to later tradition.⁴²

But Southern's quite accurate assessment of the speaking voice has elided into an assumption that this voice is in the first instance Anselm's own—an assumption that is difficult to sustain: Anselm himself, who was quite articulate about why and how he wrote his *Prayers and Meditations*, tells us that he composed them for others. In his letters and prefaces to various redactions of the *Prayers and Meditations*, Anselm describes the act

of writing prayers as a form of service, as a responsive gesture. In his letter to the monk Gundolf, for instance, he explains why he wrote not one, but three, versions of the “Prayer to St. Mary”: “A certain brother asked me, not once but many times, if I would compose a prayer to the great St. Mary.... I composed one prayer, as I was asked to do, but I was not satisfied, knowing what had been asked, so I started again and composed another. I was not satisfied with that either, so have done a third which at last is all right.”⁴³ The “Prayer to Mary” makes copious use of an impassioned “I.” Yet here we see quite clearly that Anselm, supremely skilled rhetorician that he was, scripted that “I” for another’s use; he speaks of achieving the right fit between his reader’s requirements and the words on the page as the key principle governing the act of writing. This model of composition is also evident in the collection he sent to Adelaide, daughter of William the Conqueror, in 1071. She “deigned to require” of him some prayers, and “our obedience followed your command devotedly.”⁴⁴ Moreover, the fact that Anselm appended these prayers to a collection of the psalms suggests that the “I” in them was understood as an affective technology akin to the “I” of the psalms: as a position to be entered into and made both passionate and personal by the one who performs the prayer.

Visual evidence appears to corroborate this conception of the reader’s authorial function. In Admont, Stiftsbibliothek MS 289, which dates from the early twelfth century and has been shown to derive from Matilda’s exemplar, there is a finely illuminated frontispiece that presents what might be called an author portrait (Figure 2).⁴⁵ Yet it is not a portrait of Anselm alone; two figures are depicted here, which suggests that the compilation is a joint production of its author and reader.⁴⁶ The size and position of Matilda’s body in relation to Anselm’s indicates her importance in the transaction; the book itself is positioned slightly closer to Matilda than to Anselm, highlighting her act of receiving it. The image of Anselm is less that of an author than of an ecclesiastical figure providing and endorsing the use of this book: he is seated and dressed as archbishop; he is not seated at a desk holding a pen.

Even the anchoring analogy of Anselm, then, suggests that the term “intimate scripts” is likely to be a more accurate description of John’s works than “intimate effusions.” And the full title John gave to his little book supports such a characterization, for it foregrounds the usefulness of the text to others: this *libellus* is *ad eorum praesertim utilitatem qui contemplativae sunt amatores* [for the use of those, especially, who are lovers of the contemplative life]. Clearing away the assumption of self-expressivity can open up new questions about how the *Libellus* came to have the affective character that it does, for what is now required is closer study of the contexts in which this text was first used and the reasons why John may have considered it to be especially fitting for women. Before turning to these questions, however, it is important to turn once more to the details of textual history, for there is an obvious objection to this realignment of the *Libellus*

and to the fresh assessment of origins that this realignment might afford. And that objection would seem insurmountable: the *Libellus*, according to scholars from Wilmar to Fulton, derives from the *Confessio theologica*, which has been dated to 1028.



Figure 2. Matilda of Tuscany receives *The Prayers and Meditations* from Anselm of Canterbury. Austrian, third quarter of the twelfth century. Admont, Stiftsbibliothek MS 289, f. 1. Reproduced courtesy of the Librarian,

Yet, once it is seriously investigated, this apparent fact lapses into fiction. A critical assessment of the evidence reveals that the repeated assertions that the *Confessio* was written before 1028 rest on an interpretive error. To question the basis for this date is to see how very circular the scholarship has been in casting John as self-expressive author. For even the seemingly dry and pedantic chore of establishing a chronology of John's meditative writings (conducted in the first instance by the patient and precise Wilmart) has depended on an unquestioned assumption about the meaning of "I." There is no paleographical evidence for assigning an early date to the *Confessio*.⁴⁷ The sole basis for assigning the date "before 1028" to this text turns out to be a single phrase in that lengthy text: "I ask, Lord, that I might always love my abbot, your servant, and all of my senior brothers with sincere and humble charity" (Praesta, Domine, ut famulum tuum abbatem meum et omnes seniores fratresque meos sincere et humili caritate semper diligam).⁴⁸ That John became abbot of Fécamp in 1028 is clearly documented. John would not pray for "my abbot," Wilmart reasoned, if he himself were abbot. Thus he concludes that John must have written the *Confessio* before his assumption of the abbacy in 1028.⁴⁹ But the weakness of this reasoning is obvious: this passage is a direct quotation from the *Benedictine Rule*.⁵⁰ These very words were thus voiced daily by thousands of monks throughout western Christendom. The "I" in this passage, in other words, is manifestly a performance position to be adopted by any who recite the *Rule*. It is not impossible that these words represent a personalization of the passage from the *Rule*—that what is recorded in the *Confessio* is John's own performance of a familiar prayer. John, however, does not supply any details that would signal such personalization—either here (where it would have been easy to insert the name of his abbot, William of Volpiano) or indeed anywhere in the *Confessio*. It is only critics and editors who have habitually supplied the biographical information that would link the text specifically to John. Writing in 1992, for instance, Philippe de Vial asserts that the *Confessio* "constitutes the first redaction of the texts destined for his personal use. It was composed, without a doubt, between 1018 and 1028, during the time John was prior, for we see him pray there for his abbot, who was then William of Volpiano."⁵¹

To raise a related question—why John would call his text a *Confessio*—is to locate another serious error in the scholarship, one that has in circular fashion functioned as both cause and effect of the deeply held assumption of selfexpressivity. There is no evidence that John called his text a *Confessio*. This has become the familiar title of the work only because a sixteenth-century Paris printer published it under that name.⁵² The title of the early Paris edition, having been adopted by Mabillon and enshrined in the *Patrologia Latina*, has been adopted without question in the subsequent

scholarship. It is not clear what John himself called this work.⁵³ It is a quirk of fate that has led to the reproduction of this title, with its embedded assumption that the “I” here represents John himself and that the novel affectivity of the *Libellus* had its original source in John’s private colloquys with God.

MARITAL AFFECTION IN THE *LIBELLUS*

The *Libellus*, then, would seem to be a script for the performance of prayer, designed especially for the use of the women to whom it is addressed in the two surviving prefaces, written by a servant of the church who considered the writing of prayers to be a form of pastoral care.⁵⁴ Even the fact that this text was quickly absorbed into a sea of anonymous writings has, from a literaryhistorical perspective, a rightness about it that deserves to be honored as evidence of the alterity of medieval modes of authorship and textual production. As Rosemary Woolf has put it, most medieval prayers are not “accidentally” anonymous; they are “truly” or “genuinely” anonymous.⁵⁵ Such genuine anonymity facilitates their use, for it more easily allows them to be in an important sense authored by the one performing the prayer. To preserve the name of the person who wrote the prayer could be irrelevant and even an obstacle in these circumstances.⁵⁶

But if the *Libellus* was indeed written for rather than simply sent to Agnes and the unknown nun, why would gender matter? If this text is an instrument for the production of compassionate love, why would this matter for nuns more than monks?

Marriage is once again the apparent motive. In the two prefaces to the *Libellus*, John explicitly presents the text as an affective instrument, one whose iterative use can help an aspiring bride of Christ to become worthy of acceptance as Christ’s *vera sponsa* in heaven. As we have seen, the framework of legal marriage to Christ and more particularly the logic of marital affection helps explain the social function of emotion in *The Wooing of Our Lord* and similar texts for women written in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. But even here, in the eleventh century, in the prefaces that serve as operating instructions for what is widely regarded as the earliest text in the genre of affective meditation, a proto-legal logic of marital affection is at work.⁵⁷

This logic is present at the very outset, in John’s opening sentences: “Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth [Cant. I:1]. You who long for the kiss of the divine truth with the most happy love, wait and see, for the lord is sweet. To be sure, this feeling [*affectus*] is not for just anyone, but for those spouses of God who love him purely. If, therefore, through reciting the words of holy scripture, especially those verses concerning the vision of God, you feel yourself to be inflamed toward the love of the divine, do not doubt that you will be judged worthy of the name of spouse” (*Osculetur me*

osculo oris svi. Quae osculum diuinae ueritatis felicissimo amore expetis, uaca et uide quoniam deus est suauis. Non enim hic affectus est quorumlibet hominum, sed tantum sponsarum deum caste amantium. Si ergo ad omnia sacrae scripturae eloquia, plurimum et facillime in his quae circa uisionem dei uersantur, sentis te ad amorem diuinum inflammari, ne dubites te sponsae nomine censi).⁵⁸ It is the final sentence in this opening passage that reveals a logic of marital affection. The sentence is easy to misconstrue. Indeed, Wilmart himself, excellent Latinist as he was, mistranslated the passage, putting the titular cart before the affective horse: “The intimate favors of divine love are reserved for those Spouses who truly merit that name.”⁵⁹ This misreading has been passed on to subsequent scholars through its citation in the edition by Leclercq and Bonnes. Evidently, Wilmart slotted these sentences into the only framework known to him: the familiar logic of mystical ascent in which it is the adept (allegorical “Spouses”) who will receive, as a favor from the divine, an experience of affective transport. But this is not what the passage says. It is stranger than that, more peculiar in its historical specificity. It says that *feeling* is what will earn the reader the name of spouse; it is what will constitute a spouse as spouse: “If you feel ..., you need not doubt that you will be judged worthy of the name of spouse.” Equally striking is the fact that John anticipates doubt and does so from the very start—as if responding to an ongoing conversation, as if a climate of doubt about marital status is what motivates the entire enterprise. This acknowledgment of doubt (framed as an assurance that his reader need not doubt) is linked to a moment of judgment (“ne dubites te sponsae nomine censi”)—one that John depicts at the preface’s end when he assures his reader that she will see her “true beloved” (*tuus uere dilectus*) face to face at the moment of entry into the hereafter.⁶⁰

Other passages in the preface appear to confirm these suggestions that John and his reader consider affective prayer to be a practice that will enable an ostensible spouse to become a true one. John begins by offering a pragmatic description of the *vera sponsa*: “Here is a list of the customs and devotional practices of the chaste and true spouse.”⁶¹ He then sketches a picture of the *vera sponsa* in community: she does not engage in petty disputes, does not concern herself with the misdeeds of others, does not chatter, is a lover of silence, and so on, and she spends as much time in loving contemplation as she can: “She throws herself into [incumbit] secret and frequent prayer. It is sweet to her to weep frequently. She is eager to take part in sacred vigils and the recitation of psalms, not sleepily, but intently.... The better part always, as much as it is permitted to her, she chooses with the true Mary.... She does not do anything falsely [perperam] or with pride, but, as a lily among thorns, such is the true spouse [uera sponsa] among daughters. You also imitate her ways, if you desire to be the spouse of the Word [si sponsa Verbi esse desideras].”⁶² John specifically situates the *Libellus* in the context of a religious woman’s anxieties about her

status and what he presumes to be her desire to be a true *sponsa Verbi*. The prayers he has written for her in the *Libellus* are tools, words whose loving recitation will draw forth the emotions that will define her as spouse forever: “So that this title [ornamentum; i.e., the status of *sponsa Verbi*] may be preserved by you unfailingly/eternally [iugiter], I ask that you accept with alert mind [peruigili mente] something in which I know you will delight, this little collection of sweets chosen by me, a song about your delectable spouse and his other intimates.”⁶³ This language strongly suggests that the intended function of the *Libellus* is to aid in the enactment of a marriage to Christ.

What seems to confirm this purpose all the more is the language with which the *Libellus* itself is framed in the Zwettl manuscript, which, though dating to the twelfth century, contains what may be the earliest recension of the *Libellus*.⁶⁴ In the Zwettl manuscript, the opening rubrics read, “A golden ring will be given to the *anima* who is called *sponsa*.”⁶⁵ This is a citation from contemporary rites for the consecration of virgins, and it represents the promise that is held out to nuns in that rite: that if they persist—if they demonstrate themselves to be true *sponsae*—they will receive the ring of marriage at the moment of entry into heaven.⁶⁶ The whole of the *Libellus* is framed by this marital promise, for its ending stages the ideal outcome of the marriage. It is a headlong rush toward that defining moment of truth: “Now I see what I longed to see; now I possess what I hoped to possess; now I have what I yearned to have! I am united now in heaven to him whom, when I was on earth, I loved with all my strength and embraced with all my love. I cleaved to him with all my heart [cui toto amore inhaesi]; now I praise, bless, and adore him who lives and reigns as God for endless ages. Amen.”⁶⁷ This passage is the conclusion to that all-important fourth prayer. It has been known that this is a direct citation from the liturgy of the Feast of St. Agnes, which in turn cites the *Passio* of Agnes. What has not been recognized is the functional significance that this citation in its intertextual and performative matrix exposes. St. Agnes is the exemplary *sponsa Christi* in the eleventh century: she is the virgin martyr who proved her worthiness to be Christ’s spouse by suffering torments and violent death. Since physical martyrdom was not a real option for women of the eleventh century, the performance of its closest affective parallel—compassion—functions as substitute. For eleventh-century nuns, St. Agnes’s exemplarity was enshrined liturgically (and thus in an important sense, legally) via the rich quotation from her *vita* in the liturgy for consecration of virgins. The passages that frame the earliest version of the *Libellus* reveal its function. This text is designed to be instrumental in making a *sponsa*’s marriage true, in winning her that golden ring and earning her the right to say with St. Agnes that she is “united now in heaven to him whom, when I was on earth, I loved with all my strength and embraced with all my love.”

For the historical Agnes—Agnes of Poitou, to whom John addressed the

letter introducing the *Libellus*—the concluding words from the *Passio* of St. Agnes would have had special resonance. Why? Who was Agnes?

AGNES OF POITOU, *DOMINA IMPERATRIX, SPONSA CHRISTI*

Agnes was the widow of Holy Roman Emperor Henry III and had borne several children (including, of course, Henry IV). This largely worldly life has led to the identification of Agnes as a laywoman in much of the scholarship. But the operative identity for Agnes, as a recipient of the *Libellus*, is not simply “woman.” It was not because she was a woman that John sent the *Libellus* to her. It was because she had recently become a *sponsa Christi*. This distinction is crucial. Agnes seems to have taken the veil in November 1061, and in doing so she took herself out of the secular marriage market, even in the face of tremendous pressure to remain viable as a political pawn in high-stakes dynastic politics.⁶⁸ Agnes remained vulnerable to doubts about her social status for the rest of her life. Indeed, this may have been the particular, ongoing crisis for which John supplied the *Libellus*, which offers a script for confirming, through iterative affective practice, the identity Agnes chose when she took the veil.

Why such ongoing doubts? For one thing, widows were not virgins; physical virginity was thus not available as a sign of fidelity to Christ. In the literature on this subject, lost virginity is typically cast as a serious disadvantage for one who strives to be recognized as Christ’s true bride.⁶⁹ But in Agnes’s case, this ambiguous status was especially acute, for her reasons for entering the convent included the desire to seek refuge from the political whirlwind. She admits this frankly in an impassioned letter to Albert, the abbot of Fructuaria, written shortly after she took the veil.⁷⁰ Moreover, the world kept calling her back: her young son, future Holy Roman Emperor, had been taken from her by her political opponents, and for the rest of her life, she continued to be called upon to intervene, as maternal adviser and former empress, in his high-profile, highstakes doings.⁷¹ Agnes entered the convent with mixed motives and was distressed that this was so.

John of Fécamp was not the only man Agnes turned to for guidance. Peter Damian also served as her adviser. Not only do his letters reveal a strong desire to help her confirm her identity as *sponsa Christi*; they also advocated affective meditation on the Passion as a uniquely effective performance practice in a process of her self-fashioning as *sponsa*. A letter written in the early 1060s stands as the most persuasive evidence of this self-fashioning through feeling.⁷² There has been some debate on the date of this letter, but a close reading suggests that it was written on the occasion of Agnes’s entry into the religious life, cast here as a wedding. The opening sentence reads, “To the former Countess Blanche, now united to the heavenly bridegroom, the monk Peter the sinner expresses the great joy of

his heart in the Holy Spirit. I come to feast at the royal nuptials.”⁷³ Peter then goes on to refer to “this wedding” as superior to all others: “This wedding so far surpasses all others in dignity in that here, Jesus is not considered a friend of the groom, but the bridegroom himself.” He continues: “And ‘since anyone who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him,’ this bridegroom is not only joined to his bride but united with her. This union does not beget corruption, but rather restores the integrity of virginity.”⁷⁴ Throughout the letter, Peter congratulates Agnes on her decision to enter into this bond with Christ and seeks to confirm her in this purpose. He praises her for rejecting the world and warns her that she will need to continue to resist even what appear to be good reasons for returning to it—most of all her attachment to her young son, whom she has left behind by entering the convent.⁷⁵

In this letter, Peter advocates affective meditation as the core practice in which Agnes ought to engage: “Venerable sister, embrace this bridegroom with true affection and in this always find your delight. ‘Make the Lord your only joy,’ I say, ‘and he will give you what your heart desires.’”⁷⁶ Intimate affective union with the Christ who suffered the Passion is the goal:

May Christ by the warmth of his love always live in your heart, that the words of the bride in the Song of Songs may also apply to you: “My beloved is a sachet of myrrh, he shall lie between my breasts” [Cant. 1:12]. What is signified by myrrh, a kind of bitter spice with which the bodies of the dead are conditioned, unless it be the passion of Christ? And what is meant by the phrase “between my breasts” if not the location of the heart? And so, whoever constantly embraces Christ in the secret recesses of the heart, whoever continually meditates on the mystery of his passion with the purpose of imitating him, for such a one Christ surely becomes a sachet of myrrh and, according to the words of sacred Scripture, Christ resides between her breasts.⁷⁷

This line of thought continues:

Therefore, venerable sister, always take care that the heavenly bridegroom also keeps you before his eyes through the grace of his love and that you do not, God forbid, look elsewhere by loving the things of time. And thus, as he looks attentively at you, not finding any remnant of sin, he is able to say, “You are wholly beautiful, my love, and without a blemish.” And you, unutterably burning with his love, may be able to say with feeling [*intima voce depromas*], “My beloved is white and ruddy, chosen from among thousands; his head is golden, purest gold, his throat is sweetness itself, altogether lovable.” The beloved is indeed white in his virginity, and ruddy by reason of his passion.⁷⁸

These lines are exceptional in Peter Damian's writings—not only in their portrayal of the “lovableness” of Christ (whom Peter portrays so often elsewhere as terrifying judge) but also on the specific practice of affective meditation on the Passion as a means of cultivating the kind of tender, intimate, compassionate love that was the hallmark of the new affective mode. Moreover, Damian frames affective meditation as a practice specifically incumbent upon and rewarding to a woman who has committed herself to Christ as *sponsa*. Such meditation is what she ought to spend her life practicing: meditating “constantly”, “continually meditating on the Passion.”⁷⁹ The affective state she is to cultivate, moreover, is imagined as a bundle of myrrh between her breasts—an image that was to become so resonant in meditative practices among women in the ensuing centuries.⁸⁰ Peter's letter thus presents meditation on the Passion as a practice that will earn Agnes the right to meet her true spouse in heaven, which Peter envisions, like many of his contemporaries, as one long marriage banquet: “Venerable sister, may almighty God admit you to these joys; may he who became the price of your redemption be your reward when he takes you to himself.”⁸¹

This, then, is the matrix in which John sent the *Libellus* to Agnes. Like that of Peter Damian, John's letter to Agnes seeks to help her achieve the goal of becoming Christ's *vera sponsa* even in the face of worldly pressures. And it is in this framework that the *Libellus*, including its formal structure, can best be understood. The unusual form of the *Libellus* has never been accounted for in the scholarship. The four prayers at the end have been discussed independently, as if they bear no meaningful relation to the lengthy chapters on heaven that precede them. But the structure of the *Libellus* makes perfect sense in the context of Agnes's predicament as aspiring bride of Christ. In the long first part of the *Libellus*, John offers Agnes many chapters designed to stir up a fervent longing for heaven and for union with Christ there; this desire, so cultivated, is the goal that the iterative use of the four prayers appended at the end could help her achieve. Moreover, that final, fourth prayer would have had special, personal relevance to Agnes, given the way it advances St. Agnes as model bride of Christ. In this prayer, multiple layers of meaningful citational utterance were available specifically to Agnes. “Now I see what I have longed to see. Now I possess what I have longed to possess”: these words were offered to every *sponsa Christi* as aspiration in the rite of consecration, but they were words that the historical Agnes could declaim with special feeling, conviction, and performative efficacy, as one who shared the name of the successful bride of Christ who (it was said) first uttered them. The “intimate script” John wrote for her could thus *become*, through intense, iterative performance, an “intimate effusion”—making this complex woman of this world a true bride of Christ in the next.

Agnes of Poitou and her near contemporaries Matilda of Tuscany and Eve of Wilton currently enter the story of affective devotion as after-the-fact, nongenerative recipients of the earliest affective meditations on the Passion (the most that is claimed for Matilda, for instance, is her instrumentality in promoting and circulating the collection Anselm sent to her; and even in very recent scholarship on the *Liber confortatorius* dedicated to Eve, it is Goscelin who is called “a highly original author at the forefront of cultural change”).⁸² Thus it is the authors of these texts—John, Anselm, and, to a lesser extent, Goscelin—who have been heralded repeatedly as inventors of the genre of affective meditation. But when we look closely at context, these men take on another cast: they come to seem more like go-betweens in the marriages of aspiring *sponsae Christi*. This is not to say that these authors wrote only as go-betweens or that marriage to Christ provides a single, comprehensive explanation for the origins of affective devotion. It is a generative matrix, however, whose significance for the intersecting histories of affective meditation and the history of emotion has been missed.

There is a compelling need then to investigate affective pressures and practices among women *avant la lettre* in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and there is an obvious disciplinary irony in my call for such work. Historians writing on this subject have tended to attribute a great deal of influence to particular literary texts. From Southern to Fulton, the operative model has been one in which authors, influenced by various currents of thought in their cultures, experience God in a new way, write this down, and circulate these texts to others; the dissemination of these texts through manuscripts is what produced the large-scale transformation in devotional sentiment throughout Europe. This essentially top-down model of cultural change gives written texts enormous causal power. As a literary historian, I see literary texts (at least in this context) as far less influential than this. They are, in this early period, the textual siblings of existing practices, and it is these practices and the aspirational frameworks in which they are embedded that are most in need of recovery.

Experimentally, I thus ask at this chapter’s end a further question—one that seems particularly important because of the prominence of Anselm’s *Prayers and Meditations* in narratives of affective devotion. Who was Matilda of Tuscany, and to what identity did she aspire? It is an important question, not least because it is one she herself provoked. *Matilda*, she called herself in official documents, *si quid est*: “whoever she might be.”

Matilda has played two curiously bifurcated roles in contemporary scholarship. She has, on the one hand, attracted significant attention as perhaps the most powerful, strategic, hard-headed, politically savvy woman of the western Middle Ages, one who succeeded in defending Italian lands from the repeated threats of Henry IV and acted as the chief military arm of

the Church during the Investiture Controversy.⁸³ On the other hand, she figures in histories of devotion as the first recipient and most assiduous promoter of the complete collection of Anselm's *Prayers and Meditations*. Yet the question has never been asked: why would this hard-headed woman wish to soften her heart? Or why would Anselm consider his intensely emotional prayers especially suitable for her and assume that she would wish to "compose others after their example"? I suggest that Matilda's devotions and her quest for power may have been of a piece: cultivating softness of heart may have been a hard-headed tactic. Many features of Matilda's biography suggest that she wished to enact the most advantageous marriage possible (marriage to Christ) while continuing to hold worldly power and serve the interests of the Church. That Matilda considered herself Christ's bride has never been advanced as a possibility in the extensive scholarship; yet there is significant evidence to support a reading of Matilda as aspiring *sponsa Christi*.

First, there is her puzzling seal, one of two known seals from her chancery.⁸⁴ As Rosalind Jaeger Reynolds writes,

On this seal is depicted the head and torso of an unmistakably female figure with long flowing hair, who may or may not be wearing a breastplate. Wrapped around the image is her usual signature: *Matilda dei gratia, si quid est*. The seal is particularly striking for two reasons: for one, far from trying to create a virile, ducal image with typical masculine imagery, the artist appears to have deliberately emphasized Matilda's femininity (although if she is indeed meant to be wearing a breastplate, the plot thickens). Secondly, the depiction of long, unbound hair appears to be highly unusual, perhaps anomalous, for women's seals in the Middle Ages. It is not, however, an unusual motif within medieval iconography of virgins, particularly virgin martyrs.⁸⁵

Reynolds suggests that this feature of Matilda's self-presentation may indicate the value to the papacy of having "its greatest lay supporter depicted in saintly terms" or that "Matilda discovered—as Elizabeth Tudor would half a millennium later—that a virgin ruler has fewer rivals."⁸⁶ But since the primary signification of the image of the virgin martyr at this time is that of a woman dedicated to Christ as *sponsa*, it is worth considering the seal as a potential indication of this identity. The timing of Matilda's adoption of this seal may be important in this respect. Matilda adopted this seal in the 1070s, during the period when she was between earthly husbands—between, that is, the marriage her parents arranged to her stepbrother "Godfrey the Hunchback" (whom she eventually refused to live with and who was murdered in 1076) and her even more miserable, fiercely defied marriage to "Welf the Fat," the latter entered into only in obedience to the Pope himself. It was also in the 1070s that Matilda adopted a highly unusual

signature, one she used in surviving charters: *Matilda, dei gratia si quid est* (“Matilda, by the grace of God, if she is anything,” or “Matilda, whoever she may be by the grace of God”).⁸⁷ Those who have asked about this striking feature of Matilda’s self-presentation have speculated that it reflects “conscious irony” or even “smugness,” or an uncertainty concerning how she should sign official documents given the abundant options (*ducatrix, domina, comitissa, uxor, filia*).⁸⁸ To this array of possibilities, I would add another: that Matilda chose this ambiguous title in part because it aptly designated her liminal status as a powerful laywoman unable or unwilling to retire from the world, yet committed to Christ as *sponsa*.

Perhaps the strongest evidence that Matilda conceived of herself as a “true” bride of Christ and directed her devotions toward attaining that status appears in the commentary on the *Song of Songs* that she commissioned from John of Mantua. In it, John addresses Matilda not only as *sponsa* but—in a refinement that, as we have seen, had important resonance for women betrothed to Christ—as *true sponsa*: “o vere Dei sponsa.”⁸⁹ The work as a whole presents Matilda serving as faithful bride not only through her vigorous participation in the active life but also through her contemplative practices, which include above all loving Christ as the bride of the *Songs* loves the bridegroom—that is, with “vehement affection.”⁹⁰ John does not explicitly advocate affective meditation on the Passion but does so indirectly: he advises Matilda to dwell on “purple thoughts,” explaining that purple signifies the Passion.⁹¹

Another telling feature of this text is its concluding line, which urges Matilda to imitate the *sponsa* of the *Song of Songs* so that she will enter into her inheritance in heaven and stand before her spouse, Jesus: “Follow this *sponsa* in her strenuous exercises [in sui exercitii labore] so that you may deserve to enter into that inheritance, standing before your spouse our Lord Jesus Christ, who with God the Father and the holy spirit lives and reigns as God for ever and ever. Amen.”⁹² This statement, as I see it, is the logic of marital affection: engage repeatedly in strenuous affective exercises, like the *sponsa* of the *Song of Songs*, so that on entering heaven you will deserve to be united to Christ as legitimate spouse for eternity.

That Matilda would wish to have herself cast as the bride of the *Canticles* is especially noteworthy in light of the way her marriages are treated in the official account of her life by Donizone.⁹³ In this biography, completed during Matilda’s lifetime and presumably intended to flatter her, neither of her two earthly husbands are even mentioned. There is no language in the body of Donizone’s text directly asserting that Matilda considered herself married to Christ. But in the opening address, there is an acrostic that reads “Matilda ancilla dei.” *Ancilla dei* can mean simply “servant of God,” and Matilda was quite obviously and openly such a servant. But the phrase also has the more specific sense of a woman vowed to God: it is a frequent synonym for *nun*, and it is used to refer to the Virgin, who was becoming at

just this time the model bride of Christ. Indeed, the affective meditations written for Matilda by Anselm of Lucca, which ask her to imitate the Virgin in her compassion for Christ—and even to enter into the scene as participatory beholder, as so many later meditations do—lend further support to this interpretation of the phrase.⁹⁴

Matilda, “whoever she may be”: reader of affective meditations, and assiduous promoter of them, especially among female religious; bride of Christ in the making?⁹⁵

The earliest surviving meditations in this tradition, then, could justly be described as “surfacing” of affective practices among women—practices that went hand in hand with an overarching, historically specific goal that the exercise of intimate, compassionate love appears to have afforded uniquely to women, even as early as the eleventh century: legal marriage to Christ in the hereafter. While this particular claim about the origins of the genre is new, the broader relation it posits between literature and history is not. Peter Dronke put it well several decades ago: where various forms of religious literature are concerned, “what happens to be visible in the learned world,” particularly in the period before the twelfth century, “is little more than the tip of an iceberg.”⁹⁶

That iceberg can be glimpsed more easily when the theory of the “great man” is resisted. This is why I do not take up Anselm more frontally in this study, even though the grand narrative would suggest that attention to Anselm is obligatory, and this is why I have made no attempt to extend the scholarship on Bernard of Clairvaux. I would not wish to deny the particular rhetorical talents of these men or to posit that the use male monastics made of such prayers was not also “generative” of affective devotion.⁹⁷ But by provisionally setting Anselm and Bernard aside, another narrative appears—one that is less grand, and perhaps less satisfying owing to the far less ample store of sources concerning women’s lives—but perhaps more true.

It seems fitting to end this discussion of the first stage of the “revolution in feeling” with a phrase that appears to testify not to the influence of great men but to that of a woman whose name is never even mentioned in the sources: Aelred of Rievaulx’s sister. It was this sister to whom Aelred addressed the *De institutione inclusarum*, or *Rule of Life for a Recluse* (1160–62). Here we find for the first time in a single text many of the stylistic qualities and affective strategies that were to become so prominent in Passion meditations of later centuries: a step-by-step realistic narrative; the use of the present tense and deictic rhetoric; the adoption of a range of feminine subject positions from which to behold Christ’s life and suffering (bride, mother, handmaid, feminized man); a strategic suspension of reference to Christ’s divinity and resurrection; and above all gentle yet insistent efforts to script emotional performance through frequent exhortations to behold, to grieve, to bear feeling witness to this human

tragedy. Aelred urges his reader to make herself present at every scene of the Passion, to feel compassion when Christ is betrayed, to grieve when “his most sweet back is torn with whips,” to weep with the Virgin at the foot of the cross: “draw near to the cross with the Virgin Mother and the virgin disciple, and look at close quarters upon that face in all its pallor. What then? Will your eyes be dry as you see your most loving Lady in tears? Will you not weep as her soul is pierced by the sword of sorrow? Will there be no sob from you as you hear him say to his mother, ‘Woman, behold your son,’ and to John: ‘Behold your mother’?”⁹⁸ Aelred has been called “the Bernard of the North” in the scholarship, and the *Rule of Life for a Recluse* is habitually categorized as a “Cistercian” text.⁹⁹ But Aelred does not credit Bernard as his inspiration, nor does he refer to affective meditation on the Passion as a Cistercian practice.¹⁰⁰ Rather, he credits his sister as the generative agent behind the composition of this text: “Faciam quod hortaris,” he writes: “I will do what you ask.”¹⁰¹



Franciscan Meditation Reconsidered

IN 1207, AFTER SIXTEEN YEARS spent serving lepers in Liège while begging alms for her sustenance, Marie d'Oignies retired to the priory of Saint-Nicholas at Oignies-sur-Sambre, in what is now Belgium. Fame had become too great a burden: the example she had set, living in poverty because Christ had lived in poverty, serving lepers because she saw Christ in them, had attracted many to come and work with her and the loosely affiliated group of women known as the *mulieres sanctae*, or beguines. In 1207, she was above all seeking the solitude needed for prayer—prayer of an intensely affective kind, centered on the Passion. Jacques de Vitry, her confessor, biographer, and most ardent disciple, paints a vivid picture of her devotions. While meditating in church one day, for instance, Marie's tears flowed so copiously at the memory of the Passion that "the ground in the church became muddy with her footprints ... For a long time after this visitation she could neither gaze at an image of the Cross, nor speak, nor hear other people speaking about the passion of Christ" without falling into a swoon.¹ Another time, in a state of ecstasy, Marie saw a burning angel—a seraph—standing by her, and in this state she inflicted wounds on her body in compassionate imitation of the wounds suffered by Christ. After her death in 1213, the women washing her body discovered the wounds and marveled at them—just as they should have, writes Jacques, for amazement is the fitting response to evidence of "such fortitude in the frail sex of a woman who, wounded by charity and invigorated by Christ's wounds, neglected the wounds of her own body."²

The narrative is familiar: the dedication to a life of poverty, begging for alms, caring for lepers, weeping copiously during prayer, receiving Christ-like wounds in the flesh when a seraph appears—and all this motivated by a fervent desire to share in the sufferings of Christ, to yield compassion for Christ's act of love in the Passion. It is, of course, a classic "Franciscan" narrative. Yet it is safe to say that Marie never heard of the world's most celebrated saint, for he had not yet been invented. In 1207, Francis was still living in obscurity on the outskirts of Assisi, toiling away at fixing the Church of San Damiano. His conversion was not fully effected until 1209, when he chose a life of poverty and began to preach repentance; the miracle of the stigmata occurred in 1224, eleven years after Marie's death.

These parallel stories need not suggest that Francis was influenced by Marie d'Oignies, though this is indeed possible.³ Rather, I advance it here because it so clearly exposes the fiction of Francis's radical originality. Compassionate devotion to the Passion was most certainly an affective practice central to the lives of religious women before its adoption by the Franciscans.⁴ Yet the story of the "Franciscan revolution" has proven remarkably resistant to critical investigation—not only, I would suggest, because the Francis of the legends and art is such a powerfully attractive figure or because early Franciscan writings are so insistent on his originary status, but also because Franciscan studies as an academic discipline continues to be dominated by those with Franciscan affiliation and confessional interests.⁵ Thus, Francis is typically cast as history's chief exemplar of compassionate devotion to the suffering Christ. The emotion of compassion itself is called Franciscan,⁶ and meditative literature that seeks to elicit compassion is typically situated in a genealogy of "Franciscan literature."⁷

This chapter presents a challenge to this settled and celebratory story by offering a new history of the origins of what is typically regarded as the quintessential Franciscan meditative text: the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi*, composed sometime between circa 1336 and 1364 and usually attributed to the Franciscan preacher Johannes de Caulibus.⁸

It is widely agreed that the *Meditations* was the single most influential devotional text in the later Middle Ages. Well over two hundred manuscripts survive, and the work was translated into every major European vernacular, including Old Irish, Swedish, Icelandic, and Catalan, by the close of the Middle Ages.⁹ With its gentle invitations to the reader to enter the scene, its stepby-step narrative, its cultivation of intimacy between the reader and Christ and the Virgin, its graphic depictions of the violence Christ endured, its use of the present tense and deictic rhetoric, and its frequent direct appeals to the reader to have pity, this text epitomizes more than any other the kind of writing that fostered empathetic piety in the later Middle Ages. J. A. W. Bennett, for example, calls it "by far the most influential book" in the late medieval shift in sensibility; John Fleming, describing it as "a virtually 'pure' Franciscan work," stresses its importance in confident terms: "Its influence on popular lyric poetry, on the development of the vernacular drama, and on iconographic conceptions in the visual and plastic arts was both immediate and profound."¹⁰ Gail Gibson argues that this "enormously influential" text provided "a basic religious aesthetic for vernacular devotional literature. Simply stated, the *Meditationes* replaced the claims of traditional authorities with the claims of the heart, challenged the claims of historical veracity with the claims of the eye."¹¹ If any single meditative text from the later Middle Ages can be deemed revolutionary, then, the *Meditations* certainly merits that title. And that we can designate the text's revolutionary power as "Franciscan" has always been taken as a given, for

the text announces its Franciscan origins in no uncertain terms: the prologue presents Francis and Clare as models to be imitated, directly stating that Clare is the “sweetest mother” of the nun for whom the text is intended; there are scattered references to Franciscan friars, houses, and customs; and the manuscripts often attribute the work to Bonaventure.¹²

Nonetheless, I will argue that the *Meditations* fits better into a genealogy of affective meditations for women—a generic kinship composed especially of the texts listed at the outset of [Chapter 2](#)—than it does into the Franciscan tradition. This claim, of course, begs an important question.

WHAT IS FRANCISCAN LITERATURE?

In a chapter with this title in his *Introduction to the Franciscan Literature of the Middle Ages*, Fleming advances a very broad definition: “I mean by the term Franciscan literature primarily those works of poetry, fiction, song, and the historical and visual imaginations which are related, stylistically and ideologically, to the great Franciscan movement of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Europe. Franciscan literature thus conceived of course does not include all books written by medieval Franciscans, nor is it limited to works written by them only.”¹³ In defining the term in this way, Fleming rejects the more precise meaning of the term, literature by Franciscans, on the grounds that it is “always potentially narrow and can easily become myopically chauvinistic.”¹⁴ But by extending the word *Franciscan* to cover such an extended scope of religious writing, Fleming obscures one of his own important insights about the genesis of the *Meditations* and related texts. In the midst of a larger discussion about Franciscan literature, he emphasizes the formative role of women readers in a richly suggestive paragraph that is worth quoting in full:

One major shaping force of Franciscan literature is audience. Whatever the situation may be with regard to other literary periods, it is surely a mistaken notion to seek medieval “women’s literature” exclusively or even primarily in works written by women or in works which, though written by men, deal with “women’s themes.” In the world of secular letters there are to be sure a few remarkable women authors, such as Marie de France in England; but the paradoxical truth may be that women exercised a far greater “influence” over the development of medieval romance as “readers” than as writers. A courtly audience, largely female in its composition, was the self-conscious arbiter of taste in important literary centers throughout Europe. Women were likewise the defining audience for much late medieval religious literature. If we have a good deal to learn about the social world of Wolfram von Eschenbach from his implied readers, we have no less to learn about the strategies of the mystery

plays and the affective energies of the passion lyrics from *their* audiences. It is in no sense a mere literary accident that Francis sang his *Cantico di frate sole* for the sisters of San Damiano, or that John of Caulibus addressed the *Meditationes vitae Christi* to a Poor Clare, or that Friar Thomas of Hales dedicated his “love-rune” to “a certain young woman.”¹⁵

The argument I present in these pages amplifies and extends the insights Fleming registers here, insights he himself does not develop in the remainder of his book.

Fleming is not alone in characterizing the *Meditations* as the quintessential Franciscan meditative text. But its particular stylistic and affective features have relatively little in common with Franciscan writing that preceded it. To see this discrepancy, it will be useful first to outline the general contours of Franciscan writing in the first century of the Order’s existence. Most Franciscan writing from this period is not devotional or meditative: literary energies are invested primarily in other genres. Franciscans produced copious hagiographical texts, theological works, treatises on the miracle of the stigmata, writings on the poverty question and the history of the Order, a significant body of apocalyptic texts, some works of natural history, and a popular encyclopedia.¹⁶ Relatively little Franciscan writing of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries is meditative in character—intended, like the *Meditations*, for use in private prayer.¹⁷

Of these, Bonaventure’s writings are by far the most important. His *Itinerarium mentis in deum* (*The Soul’s Journey into God*), *De triplici via* (*The Triple Way*) and *Lignum vitae* (*Tree of Life*) were widely copied and translated, and many of Bonaventure’s emphases and rhetorical habits were imitated by others writing in the meditative tradition.¹⁸ But Bonaventure’s writings differ in important ways from the *Meditations*. In each of his meditative works, affective response is assertively situated within a framework of speculative theology; thus the texts seek to engage the reader’s intellect more than the heart, and the apprehension of theological truth is the ultimate aim.¹⁹

This aim is clearly evident in the *Lignum vitae*, the work that has the most in common formally and stylistically with the *Meditations*. Structured according to the central events in the life of Christ, with a particular emphasis on the Passion, it seeks to involve the reader as a feeling participant. A passage describing how Christ was blindfolded and mocked by the crowd, for example, is followed by the prayer, “O truthful and kind Jesus, what soul who is devoted to you, when it sees and hears this, can restrain itself from tears and hide the sorrow of its inner compassion?”²⁰ But the fundamental impulses of the *Lignum vitae* and the *Meditations* are quite disparate: in Bonaventure’s work, the reader is never allowed to lose sight of

the divinity of Christ, and this arguably inhibits rather than fosters compassionate response. The nativity is not the simple birth of a baby, for instance, but a grand event in salvation history: “When nine months had passed since his conception, the King of Peace like a bridegroom from his bridal chamber ... came forth from the virginal womb” (128). Realism is constantly disrupted by allegory and exegesis, which prevents any sustained emotional engagement with the literal level of the narrative. The flight into Egypt, for instance, is not the journey of a vulnerable infant and his parents but “Jesus’ Exile from his Kingdom” (132). This habit of checking the reader’s impulse toward compassionate response extends to the Passion scenes. The chapter “Jesus Dripping with Blood” exemplifies the characteristic impulses of Bonaventure’s meditative writing. The image of Christ on the cross, which provides such a spur to compassion in the *Meditations* and other meditative texts for women, is not used primarily to encourage affective response here. The scene begins with a gruesome visual image: “Christ the Lord was stained with his own blood, which flowed profusely: first from the bloody sweat, then from the lashes and the thorns, then from the nails and finally from the lance” (156). But this bleeding flesh is immediately, cleverly transformed, first into a “priestly robe of red,” then into the garment of a wine presser, then into the tunic of Joseph, and finally into the “sacred garment ... artistically woven by the Holy Spirit” from the “most chaste body” of the Virgin (156–67).²¹

Significantly, the affective practice Bonaventure advocates specifically for nuns bears a closer resemblance than any of his meditative works to the affective mode forming the core of the *Meditations*. Bonaventure wrote *On the Perfection of Life, Addressed to Sisters* at the request of a Poor Clare who is probably to be identified as Isabella, sister of Louis IX, abbess of the convent of Longchamp. In this text, he urges his reader to vividly imagine the crucifixion and to identify with the suffering Christ with full intensity of affect: “There, transformed into Christ by your burning love for the Crucified, pierced by the nails of the fear of God, wounded by the spear of superabounding love, transfixes by the sword of intimate compassion, seek nothing, desire nothing, wish for no consolation, other than to be able to die with Christ on the cross.”²² This passage could be interpreted as an attempt to promote among women the ideal embraced by Franciscans and enshrined as the Order’s motto, *Mihi absit gloriari nisi in cruce Domini* (“Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of the Lord”). Yet it also fits quite easily in an independent tradition of affective writing for women. In the *Ancrene Wisse*—almost certainly composed between 1215 and 1224, before the arrival of the Franciscans in England—we find the same verse presented as one particularly appropriate for anchoresses: “All you ever endure is penance ... for night and day you are up on God’s cross.... Therefore St. Paul says, *Michi absit gloriari nisi in cruce domini mei Iesu Christi*.”²³ This phrase is quoted directly from *Galatians* (6:14), not from a Franciscan source citing *Galatians*,

and it is followed by the statement that it is “especially relevant to recluses, whose joy ought to be wholly in God’s cross.”²⁴

A closer look at Bonaventure’s phrasing, as well as at the devotional context of his treatise, further suggests that he was seeking to encourage the Poor Clare and her sisters in a form of meditation on the Passion that they were already practicing. “Reverend Mother, devoted to God and dear to me,” he writes in his preface, “you have asked me to dictate, out of the poverty of my heart, a treatise in which your soul may find some timely thoughts to nourish its devotion.”²⁵ Bonaventure does not claim to be introducing a novel form of meditation, only nourishing an existing one. And what we know of the Order of Poor Clares indicates that affective meditation on the Passion was central to their devotional lives from the very beginning. As Clara Gennaro observes, Clare’s canonization papers contain testimony by her companions that “their prayer was essentially centered on the heartfelt and affective participation in the fundamental moments of the life of Christ, and in a special way on the Passion.”²⁶ André Vauchez also emphasizes the importance of Clare’s devotion to the Passion. He does not suggest that she adopted this practice from Francis but rather that it was part of the “feminine piety” of her times: in her spiritual life, “as was the case with most of the holy women of her time, meditation on the Passion of Christ and on his sufferings as well as the contemplation of his humanity had a central place.”²⁷ If Bonaventure recommends contemplation of the Passion to the Poor Clares, it appears to be because this practice was already favored by them. Even before Bonaventure wrote his treatise (ca. 1260), we find the Poor Clares advising each other to meditate on the sufferings of Christ. In her second letter to Agnes of Prague, composed sometime between 1235 and 1238, Clare writes: “Now that you have made yourself contemptible in this world for his sake, look upon and follow the one who made himself contemptible for your sake.... Gaze upon, examine, contemplate ... your spouse, who is more beautiful than the sons of humankind, and who for your salvation became the vilest of men, despised, struck, and flogged repeatedly over his entire body, dying while suffering the excruciating torments of the cross.”²⁸ Clare’s final letter to Agnes, composed from her deathbed in 1253, encourages her to “contemplate the ineffable love with which he was willing to suffer on the tree of the cross and to die there a kind of death that is more shameful than any other.”²⁹

Apart from Bonaventure’s letter to nuns, only Ubertino da Casale’s *Arbor vitae* exhibits close similarities to the *Meditations* in terms of its stylistic strategies and chief affective goals.³⁰ Though often highly allegorical and exegetical, and often preoccupied with Franciscan polemic, it does contain a substantial and profoundly moving Passion section that shares many features with the *Meditations*.³¹ Here we find exclamations of feeling, direct invitations to enter the scene, graphic description of Christ’s torn and bleeding body, and use of the figure of the Virgin as a model for the

meditator's response. When the crowd cries out for the release of Barrabas instead of Christ, for instance, the reader is exhorted to let "those horrible shouts and those hard, cruel voices of the wicked ... pierce your heart."³² The Virgin's laments are unrestrained outpourings of grief, and details of the crucifixion are added for their affective power. Christ undergoes the shame of being stripped of all his clothing, "and thus he remained naked in full sight of the crowd and those who mocked him, as naked as he was when he came forth from the Virgin's womb."³³ Affective response is clearly the desired effect as the reader is exhorted to "look ... with compassion on your beloved Jesus" as he is nailed to the cross.³⁴ Such passages are as powerful as any in the *Meditations*.

But does Ubertino's affective rendering of the Passion derive from his Franciscan affiliation? Perhaps so. Yet in his preface, Ubertino states that he learned to meditate on "arcana" (those details and episodes from the life of Christ that are not mentioned in the gospels) not only from Pietro Pettinaio of Siena, a Franciscan Tertiary, but also from "the most devout virgin Cecilia of Florence," whose institutional affiliation is unknown.³⁵ More significantly still, he describes Angela of Foligno (1248–1309) as his chief spiritual guide. It was she, he writes in the prologue to the *Arbor vitae*, who inspired his conversion: "She restored a thousandfold all those spiritual gifts I had lost through my sins; so that from that moment I have not been the same man I was before. The splendor of her radiant virtue changed the whole tenor of my life. It drove out the weakness and languor from my soul and body and healed my mind torn with distractions. No one who knew me before could doubt that the spirit of Christ was newly begotten in me through her."³⁶ Angela of Foligno has been described as one of many women, deeply devoted to the Passion, who "transmitted to astonished friars an amplified echo of their own voice."³⁷ Yet Ubertino was clearly influenced by this extraordinary woman whose gender cannot easily be dismissed as a formative factor in her spiritual development or subsumed under the master category "Franciscan."³⁸

It could be argued that prose meditative texts are not the best place to look for Franciscan antecedents to the *Meditations*, for lyrics, too, were used in meditation. There is important evidence to support the claims for Franciscan involvement in the development of the vernacular religious lyric. In the legends we are told that Francis wanted his brothers to be *joculatores Dei* and that on his deathbed he sent for Brother Pacificus and requested that he mingle *laude* with his preaching.³⁹ Most of the thirteenth- and early-fourteenth-century Franciscan lyrics, however, are joyful rather than sorrowful; indeed, the generic term *lauda* originally described a song of praise. Francis himself sang in celebration, and his only recorded *lauda*, the *Cantico di frate sole*, is one of the most exuberant of all medieval poems. Thomas of Celano writes that the remembrance of the Passion often put an end to song: "Sometimes he used to do this: a sweet melody of the spirit

bubbling up inside him would become a French tune.... Other times—as I saw with my own eyes—he would pick up a stick from the ground and put it over his left arm, while holding a bow bent with a string in his right hand, drawing it over the stick as if it were a viola, performing all the right movements, and in French would sing about the Lord. All this dancing often ended in tears, and the song of joy dissolved into compassion for Christ’s suffering. Then the saint would sigh without stopping, and sob without ceasing.”⁴⁰ Of course the most accomplished Franciscan composer of *laude*, the Tertiary Jacopone da Todi, did write early and important *laude* in the pathetic mode. His “Donna del paradiso” is remarkably beautiful and moving, and it clearly seeks to involve the reader in the scene just as the *Meditations* does. “Lady,” the poem begins, “they have taken your son”:

Lady, they’ve taken one of His hands,
Pressed it against the cross,
And the nail has ripped through the flesh.
They’ve taken the other hand,
Stretched it out on the cross,
And the pain spreads and grows.
Lady, they’ve taken His feet
And nailed them to the tree;
They have broken all His bones and joints.⁴¹

But though the “Donna del paradiso” is the best known of Jacopone’s poems, it is not typical of his opus: his works are more often satirical, polemical, or celebratory.⁴²

The affective and stylistic affinities between Franciscan literature and the *Meditations*, then, are not as strong as the scholarship would lead us to suppose. As we turn now to the *Meditations* itself, we will see that it does indeed contain elements that can justly be designated as “Franciscan”—deriving, that is, specifically from ideologies promoted by the Franciscan Order. But these elements are not the same as—and in important ways run counter to—the affective mode as scripted in the tradition of meditative texts written for women. The *Meditations*, in short, has a divided heart.

THE DIVIDED HEART OF THE *MEDITATIONES VITA E CHRISTI*

Like many texts hailed for their influence, the *Meditations* has been more admired than read. When read with some care, this text comes to seem very much at odds with itself, for embedded within its “revolutionary” base are many counterrevolutionary passages—passages, in other words, that seem designed precisely to arrest rather than foster feelings of compassion; passages that seem to register a worry that Christ is depicted as too human, too vulnerable. And it is these counterrevolutionary gestures, I will argue,

that can be identified squarely as Franciscan, while what I will call the base text issues from a context in which institutional ideology was not the overriding concern: a tradition of affective meditation among women.

Affective dissonance troubles the *Meditations*. The story of how this dissonance evolved appears in the history of the text, as this history can be reconstructed anew from a comparison of the various Latin and Italian versions in the early manuscripts. At present, the long Latin version of the *Meditations* is regarded as the original version, and it has been assumed that this is a unified text composed by a single Franciscan author (probably Johannes de Caulibus). The recent publication of a critical edition of the long Latin text in the Corpus Christianorum series has given an increased sense of fixity to this theory of the text's origins.⁴³ Having examined the manuscripts in detail, however, I believe that the original version of the *Meditations* was a short Italian text composed by one nun for another; this base text—highly dramatic and affective in character—was then edited, heavily glossed, expanded into successively longer Italian versions, and finally translated into Latin by a Franciscan redactor (perhaps Johannes de Caulibus) intent on correcting the perceived flaws of the original, including its persistent efforts to elicit compassion for a very human Christ.

Elsewhere I present detailed evidence for this revised theory of the text's history.⁴⁴ Setting aside for the moment a summary of the textual argument and the relations between the various Latin and Italian versions, I will turn first to a more basic claim: that the long Latin text of the *Meditations* is not the internally coherent text it has been held to be; rather it registers competing affective priorities. These competing priorities can best be seen through a close look at one of the Latin text's most celebrated scenes, that of the crucifixion, or more accurately the two crucifixions.

It is well known that the *Meditations* presents not one but two ways of imagining the central event of the Passion: in the first, Christ mounts a ladder to a cross already fixed in the ground; in the second, he is nailed to a recumbent cross. Since the details are important, the passage is worth quoting at length:

Now take a careful look at each and every move. They force the Lord Jesus to climb the cross by the short ladder. Without protest, without resistance, he humbly does whatever they wish. Then when he reached the cross on the uppermost step of that short ladder, he twisted his body around; he opened up those royal arms and stretched out his most beautiful hands, extending them high for his crucifiers. He looks to heaven to his Father, saying, "Here I am, Father! Even to the cross you wished me to be humiliated for the salvation and love of humankind. It is right. I accept it, and I offer myself to you for those whom you have willed to be my brothers. Then you too, Father, for love of me, accept it and be appeased at

long last: wipe away all the old stain, and keep it far from them. I offer myself to you for them.”

At this point the one who is behind the cross takes his right hand and fastens it to the cross. That done, the one who is on the left side takes his left hand also and pulls and stretches it as tightly as he can; and another sets the nail, hammers and fastens it in place. After this, they climb down, and take away all the ladders. Only the nails, hammered into his hands, hold up the Lord while his body weight pulls him down. With all that still another comes along and pulls him downward by the feet as tightly as he can; and when he is at full extension, someone else attaches both feet with a very heavy nail.

Some, however, believe that he was not crucified this way, but that they crucified him with the cross lying on the ground. After they nailed him to the cross they lifted him up and fixed the cross in the ground. If this version is more acceptable, then see how they grab hold of him so contemptuously, like the lowest kind of laughing stock, and furiously hurl him on top of the cross on the ground. They grab his arms, and after a wrenching stretching, attach them to the cross. And watch this done the same way with his feet, which they pulled down on as tightly as they could.⁴⁵

Neither of these methods of crucifixion is unique to the *Meditations*; both were in circulation as iconographic and literary topoi in Italy by the time the *Meditations* was written. Faced with this odd juxtaposition, scholars have tended to interpret it as a sign of the liberal-mindedness of the author: he is not a stickler for historical or scriptural accuracy—for what really happened—but values what “can piously be believed to be occurring or to have occurred; doing this in accord with certain imaginary scenarios, which the mind perceives in a varying way.”⁴⁶ Thus, it is assumed that the author included both versions simply to double the imaginative options.

But this interpretation fails to register the serious problem that this juxtaposition creates in a text apparently designed for affective meditation: these two images contradict each other in terms of the emotional responses they seem designed to elicit.⁴⁷ Turning to the more briefly sketched recumbent crucifixion first, we can see that the crucifiers are the active agents throughout the scene and that Christ is depicted as passive human victim, thrown down on the cross like “the vilest wretch.” Nothing intrudes in this brief rendering to check compassionate response: there is no mention of Christ’s divine or kingly nature, or of his willingness to die, or of the necessity of the crucifixion in the grand scheme of things.

In affective terms, the scene of the ascent of the cross is strikingly different. This image of Christ, fully in control of his thoughts, actions, and destiny, obediently climbing toward his death, actively stretching his “royal” arms up to the crucifiers, offering himself to the Father in full sight of the

crowd, is not designed primarily to produce pity in the heart of the reader. Instead, it promotes an understanding of the crucifixion as prototypical martyrdom—as voluntary and necessary sacrifice, willingly embraced by the Incarnate God for the sake of all sinners. The scene thus encourages the reader to adopt a stoical stance; to “see through” the violence of the Passion to its larger purpose in the scheme of salvation, just as early medieval renderings of the crucifixion had done. We might well ask, then, not only why this scene is present at all but also why it is the author’s preferred image—why it is given priority and elaborated at far greater length than the recumbent crucifixion, whose potential for eliciting compassion would seem to have made it the more natural choice for development, if this was indeed what the Franciscans most valued.

I propose that the affective dissonance produced by the inclusion of the scene of ascent, in the midst of a text whose keynote is pathos, is due to the strong possibility that it is an interpolation, added along with a great many other passages by a redactor whose aims, stylistic propensities, and habits of thought are often dramatically different from those of the original author. And this redactor can be identified as a Franciscan preacher; it is often his specifically *Franciscan* additions, including the ascent of the cross, that go against the grain, diluting rather than increasing the pathos of the original text.

We can see the “Franciscanness” of the scene of ascent most clearly with the help of certain pictorial analogues and an argument put forward, in a different context and for a different purpose, by Anne Derbes.⁴⁸ As Derbes observes, the earliest scenes of the ascent of the cross in Italian painting were adopted from Byzantine models. These models did not in themselves compel an interpretation of the crucifixion as willing martyrdom. In fact the earliest extant Italian version of the ascent, a detail from a historiated cross painted by Coppo di Marcovaldo around 1261, is remarkable for its profound pathos (Figure 3). Derbes calls attention to Christ’s stooped shoulders, which reveal his “physical exhaustion”; to his crossed hands, which “imply a futile attempt to hide his near-nakedness”; and most of all to his “psychic suffering.” Christ’s “halting and tentative stance, his bowed head, and his downcast eyes all betray a deeply human reluctance to proceed.”⁴⁹

Coppo’s painting was made for the nuns of Santa Chiara in San Gimignano. These women were Poor Clares, but Derbes does not see Franciscanism itself as the source of the pathos in Coppo’s painting.⁵⁰ It is not this version but another version of the ascent, first exemplified in a painting by Guido da Siena made between 1275 and 1280, that reflects an ideology specific to the Franciscan Order (Figure 4). Derbes describes the painting thus: “Unlike Coppo’s anguished prisoner who laboriously begins the ascent, Guido’s Christ resolutely seizes the ladder and bounds forward, actually bypassing the lowest rung in his apparent eagerness to proceed. The profoundly human image of Coppo’s suffering victim has been displaced by

this image of Christ as triumphant savior, whose will to redeem humanity far outweighs any reluctance to suffer and die.”⁵¹ Derbes convincingly argues that this adaptation, which emphasizes Christ’s “heroic acceptance of death,” was “forged by the Franciscans” and was intended to inspire members of the Order to imitate not only Christ but also Francis, whose voluntary renunciation of the world was interpreted as an ascent of the cross.⁵² The figure of Elisha, the prophet in the Book of Kings who renounced this world and ascended to Bethel, also lay behind this specifically Franciscan version of the scene (2 Kings 2:23). The *Meditatio pauperis*, written to defend the ideal of Franciscan poverty, articulates this sequence of typological equivalences most fully. In this text, Francis, a second Elisha, rejects “all the riches of the world” and ascends to Bethel, “that is,” we are told, “into the Order of the Friars Minor, which truly is the home of God.”⁵³ For the Franciscans, then, the image of Christ ascending the ladder was intended to promote an ideology of voluntary sacrifice, which could have meant actual martyrdom (fervently desired, we may recall, by Francis himself) or the voluntary rejection of the world in order to follow Francis and Christ. The ascent of the cross in the *Meditations* is in keeping with this specifically Franciscan way of imagining the event. And in this version, “Franciscan affect” is clearly not imbued with pathos, nor is the image of Christ as vulnerable human victim the preferred image.⁵⁴



Figure 3. Ascent of the cross. Coppo di Marcovaldo, ca. 1261. Detail of painted crucifix from Santa Chiara, San Gimignano. Museo Civico, San Gimignano, Italy. Photo: Alinari/ Art Resource, NY.



Figure 4. Ascent of the cross. Guido da Siena, ca. 1275–80. Museum Catharijneconvent Utrecht. Reproduced by permission of the Museum Catharijneconvent Utrecht.

A close look at the *Meditations*' two scenes of crucifixion has two broad implications. First, it reveals that of the two scenes it is the one that is less intent on eliciting sorrowing, grief-filled compassion, less intent on depicting Christ as suffering victim, that can justly be called distinctly Franciscan; and this, in turn, should prompt a serious reevaluation of what is meant by "Franciscan emotion," "Franciscan *affectus*," and relatedly, "Franciscan literature." Second, the affective dissonance of the two scenes of crucifixion strongly suggests that the long Latin text is not a unified whole composed by a single author with a coherent set of aims. Rather, together with other textual, paleographical, and historical evidence, it bears witness to the work of an energetic redactor.

Who was this redactor, and what sort of text did he inherit? A preliminary sketch based on close comparison of the various recensions of the *Meditations* can be offered here. This redactor—or indeed second author, for approximately two-thirds of the Latin text can be credited to him—writes in the hortatory voice of the preacher and may well have been Johannes de Caulibus, who is described by a fourteenth-century source as "magnus praedicator."⁵⁵ He is responsible for the text's manifestly Franciscan passages—the references of filial devotion to Francis and Clare, for example, and certain sections advocating a specifically Franciscan ideal of poverty. He is responsible for the bookish parts of the text, not only for the lengthy

quotations from St. Bernard but also for the many other didactic and exegetical passages that are so often ignored in wishful readings of the *Meditations* as a “moving,” “vivid,” and “dramatic” text. The entire section on the public ministry of Christ is his. The description of Christ hanging on the cross—a scene in which Christ, “as he hung on the cross, was active until the moment he breathed his last, doing and saying things that are useful for us”⁵⁶—is also the work of this redactor. In this passage, as in the scene of the ascent of the cross and elsewhere, the redactor has sought to reinstate an understanding of Christ as king, lord, teacher—has sought to “correct,” in other words, the original’s depiction of a perhaps-too-human Christ.

As for the original version of the *Meditations* inherited by the redactor, having examined virtually all the Italian and Latin manuscripts, I believe that this can be identified as a thirty-one-chapter Italian text witnessed by a single manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Canonici Italian 174.⁵⁷ The value of this manuscript has never been recognized. Indeed, this copy of the *Meditations* has been entirely ignored, even by scholars who have been especially interested in sorting out the relation between the various Italian versions. Such neglect is surely owing in large part to the brisk dismissal of the text in the nineteenth-century Bodleian catalogue: this text, Alessandro Mortara declares in his brief description of MS 174, is clearly a copy of the *Meditations*, but one that has been “barbarously altered and ruined” (*barbaramente alterato e guasto*).⁵⁸

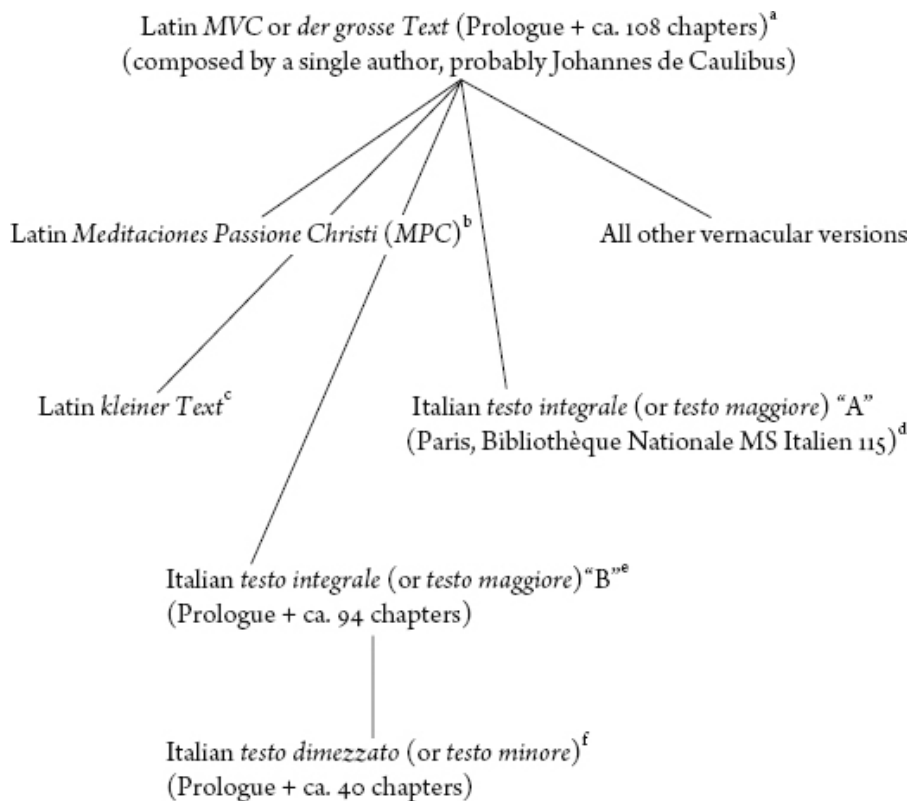
The text is indeed manifestly different from other versions of the *Meditations*, not only from the long Latin text with which most scholars are familiar but also from all the other extant Latin and Italian recensions. Far from a barbarous alteration, however, it is a stylistic masterpiece: it is here that the affective and dramatic qualities for which the *Meditations* is celebrated appear at their best. Close analysis of this text not only confirms its integrity as the work of a single, highly talented literary artist; it also suggests that its author was a woman—a nun writing for another nun and doing so from within a tradition of affective meditation among female religious.

These are large claims, requiring more ample and technical substantiation than space permits me to present here. Interested readers are thus referred to my “Origins of the *Meditationes vitae Christi*” for the fully articulated and documented argument.⁵⁹ In the pages that follow, I offer a summary of my conclusions regarding the textual tradition, as well as the primary evidence for the priority of the text witnessed by the Canonici manuscript, before taking up the question of authorship.

A REVISED TEXTUAL HISTORY OF THE *MEDITATIONS*

At present, the scholarship holds that the various versions of the *Meditations* relate to each other as depicted in [Figure 5](#). The revised textual history I

propose is sketched in Figure 6.



Note: The Italian version in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Canonici Ital. 174 was not incorporated into previous studies of the textual history of the MVC.

^a*Der grosse Text* and *der kleiner Text* are the terms Fischer introduces in “Die *Meditationes vite Christi*.” *Der grosse Text* has been edited by Stallings-Taney as *Iohannis de Caulibus: Meditationes Vite Christi*.

^bEdited by Stallings, *Meditaciones de passione Christi*. In the introduction to this edition, Sister M. Jordan Stallings definitively disproves the earlier theory, considered by Fischer and others, that the MPC was written by Bonaventure and was the core around which the MVC was later composed.

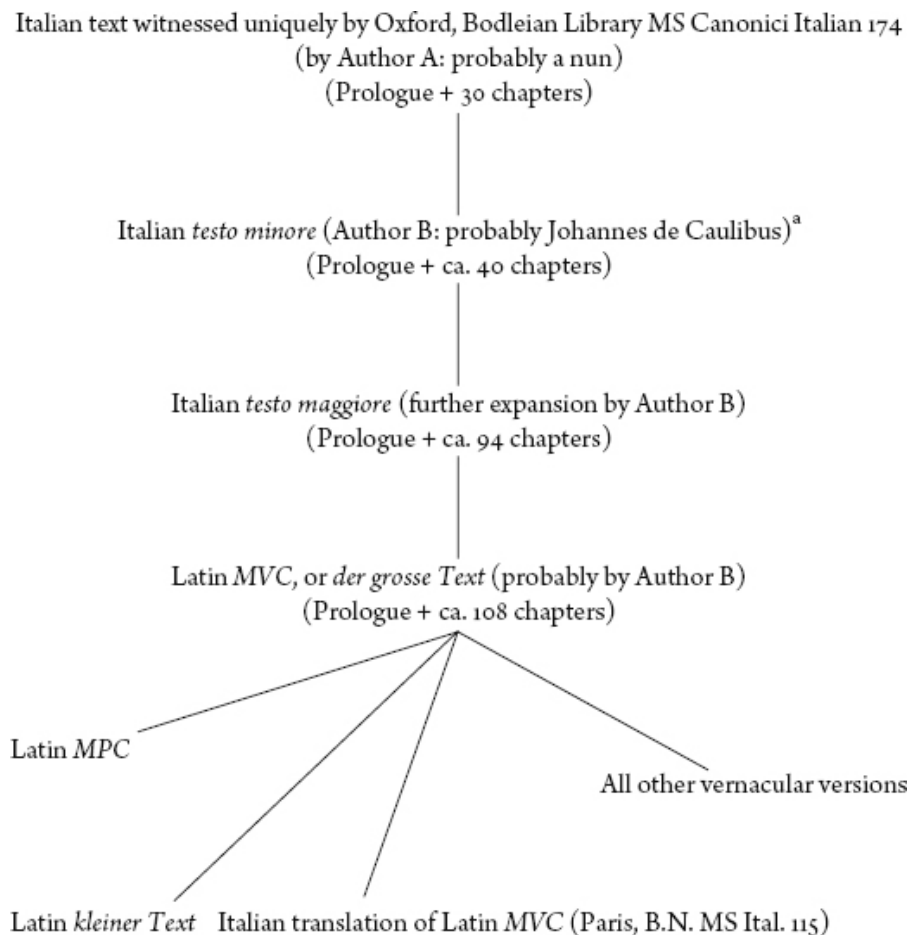
^cThis forty-one-chapter recension, identified by Fischer, has not been edited; for the argument that it is an extract from the MVC, see McNamer, “Further Evidence,” 251–58.

^dThe terms *testo integrale A*, *testo integrale B*, and *testo dimezzato* are those used by A. Vaccari in “Le ‘Meditazioni della vita di Cristo’ in volgare.” There is no critical edition of the Paris manuscript, which is the sole witness to *testo integrale A*, but the text has been translated into English by Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green.

^eThere is no critical edition; Bartolommeo Sorio’s *Cento meditazioni* is a serviceable nineteenth-century edition.

^fNo critical edition exists of the *testo dimezzato/testo minore*. Francesco Sarri reproduces the text from one of the best manuscripts, Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana MS 1419, as part of his edition, “*Le meditazioni della vita di Cristo*,” pp. 1–89 and 284–382. It should be noted Sarri believed the *testo minore* to be an extract from the *testo maggiore*; thus, in his edition, he supplies the “missing” chapters from another manuscript.

Figure 5. Traditional Textual History of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*



^aWhile the terms *testo minore* and *testo maggiore* are occasionally used in the Italian scholarship on the *MVC*, they are not used consistently. I have adopted these designations because they do not embed assumptions about their place in a textual history, as Vaccari's terms do.

Figure 6. Revised Textual History of the *Meditations*

In part, it is a close reading of the long Latin text itself that points toward this revised textual history. Discrepancies of style, voice, and tone are so pervasive as to invite suspicions that this text reflects the work of two distinct authors. To posit that a base text by one author was altered and expanded by another is not in itself a far-fetched hypothesis; such a process was very common in the later Middle Ages, especially where anonymous devotional texts were concerned. Moreover, the Latin text is replete with a vocabulary of interpolation. There are numerous passages that seem to refer quite openly and unapologetically to a process of inserting material into a

base text. One of these is especially noteworthy: “You have heard the exceedingly beautiful words of Bernard, a very great contemplative, as he savors the sweetness of prayer. Ruminare on them if you want to taste their sweetness. It is for that reason that I like to introduce and voluntarily intersperse his words liberally throughout this little work [*libenter ipsius uerba in hoc opusculo intersero et adduco*] ... because they are not only spiritual, and pierce the heart, but are also full of beauty and of urgings to the service of God” (chap. 36, 124).⁶⁰ The phrasing used here not only gestures toward a process of inserting (*intersero*) and adding (*adduco*) material to what was once a “little work” (*opusculo*), but indicates more specifically that the many lengthy passages culled from the sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux—passages that disrupt the narrative flow of the meditations and that seek chiefly to instruct rather than to move—have been added at a secondary stage in the text’s composition.

Scrutiny of the chapters on the public ministry give further reasons to doubt that the Latin *Meditations* represents the first iteration of the text and is the work of a single author. Stylistically, these chapters have little in common with the chapters on the Infancy and Passion: they relate episodes from the gospels in a more workmanlike manner, with few imagined embellishments and little attempt to stir up feeling; they habitually deploy indirect rather than direct discourse and are thus less dramatic in character; they make only minimal and perfunctory use of one of the signature traits of the *Meditations*—the adoption of a woman’s point of view. These and other differences would be enough to foster doubt that these chapters were composed by the original author of the *Meditations*, but such doubt increases when we take a closer look at the passage directly preceding these chapters. This passage reads as though it intends to function as a transition from the concluding episode in the Infancy (a meditation on Christ’s Baptism) to the events of the Passion: for “it would take too long,” we hear, “to convert everything he said and did into meditations.”⁶¹ Yet this is not what the text proceeds to deliver: what follows are no fewer than fifty-one chapters on the public ministry that take up nearly as much space as the meditations on the Infancy and Passion combined. This transitional passage is best explained as a relic witnessing to an earlier form of the work, to a previous authorial design. Yet the two Latin recensions lacking the section on the Public Ministry—the *Meditaciones Passione Christi* and *der kleine Text*—cannot have represented that original design; they have been shown on textual and paleographic grounds to be extracts from the long Latin *Meditations*.⁶²

When it is recognized that the assumption that the original must have been composed in Latin is just that—pure assumption (there is no persuasive linguistic evidence that Latin was the original language)—the Italian versions become newly available for evaluation as potential instantiations of the original *Meditations*.⁶³ Columban Fischer, the first scholar to study the textual tradition thoroughly, believed the work was originally composed in

Italian, in part because the earliest manuscripts are Italian versions of the second half of the fourteenth century; most of the Latin texts date from the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁶⁴ Moreover, the stylistic superiority of the Italian versions has often been acknowledged; they are manifestly more dramatic, making greater use of direct rather than indirect discourse and introducing colorful colloquial expressions. Explaining the superior “vivezza” of the Italian versions has thus seemed a problem in need of explanation by those who assume that the Latin came first. Luigi Cellucci posits that the original author was thinking in Italian, even while he was writing in Latin. Thus, “when the *Meditations* were translated, they perfected themselves, assuming an exterior garment more in keeping with the way in which they were conceived, and a more spontaneous and lively diction.”⁶⁵ A simpler explanation would be that the text was first composed in Italian because Italian would be easier for a nun to read. There was certainly no stigma attached to composing devotional texts in Italian in the early to mid-fourteenth century, and the vernacular would seem to be the more fitting medium, given the text’s emphasis on the domestic, the familiar, the everyday.⁶⁶

Although the Italian version translated into English by Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green has achieved wide recognition for its accompanying illustrations in the single manuscript in which it survives (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS Ital. 115), it can be ruled out as the original. It appears to bear no relation to the other Italian versions. It is a faithful if occasionally garbled translation of the Latin *Meditations*, presumably undertaken by someone who did not know of or had no access to the other Italian versions. This leaves three Italian recensions—the Canonici version, the *testo minore*, and the *testo maggiore*—for consideration as the original text.

I have concluded that the Canonici version represents the earliest state of the text, and that the *testo minore* (which treats the Infancy and Passion) and the *testo maggiore* (which treats the public ministry as well) represent successive adaptations and expansions of it, in part for the following reasons. First, the original is most likely to have contained only the Infancy and Passion sections, not only because the section on the public ministry in the *testo maggiore* is, like its Latin iteration, stylistically inferior to the chapters that bracket it (and prefaced by the same awkward transition) but also because such a structure makes perfect sense. Special devotion to the Infancy and Passion was the norm in devotional literature, art, and practices in the early fourteenth century; the public ministry was rarely a subject for devotional contemplation. Moreover, the two versions containing only the Infancy and Passion—the Canonici version and the *testo minore*—each contain the transitional passage cited above, with the telling difference that in this context it functions as a very smooth hinge between the chapters on the Infancy and the Passion. One of these two versions would appear to

represent the original text.

There are very significant differences between the Canonici version and the *testo minore*: dramatically, affectively, theologically. Which came first? Determining the direction of revision between recensions is often a very complex matter, but close textual analysis indicates that the Canonici version's claims to original status are far stronger—and that the *testo minore* represents the initial revisions by the redactor.

The *testo minore*, for instance, contains whole sources lacking in the Canonici text. One of these is the *Revelations of St. Elizabeth of Hungary*, which is quoted at length in the description of the Virgin's childhood in the *testo minore*. It is on the basis of the inclusion of the *Revelations of St. Elizabeth of Hungary* that the *Meditations* has been dated to after circa 1336.⁶⁷

The absence of this source in the Canonici version leaves open the possibility that this version of the *Meditations*, and this version alone, may have been composed before 1336. There are two other telling systematic differences between the Canonici version and the *testo minore*. One of these is the presence in the *testo minore* of specific distances and place names in the Holy Land. This text mentions that the shepherds were “perhaps about a mile away” when they heard of the birth of Jesus, that the Jordan River is “seventy-four miles from Jerusalem,” that the name of the mountain where Jesus was tempted is “Mount Quarentana,” and so on.⁶⁸ Such a concern to represent distances and places accurately is not present in the Canonici version. It is easy to see why a redactor with knowledge of such details might wish to insert them; it is difficult to imagine a motive for systematically removing them. This difference is of a piece with a broader tendency, that of the *testo minore* to provide greater specificity of factual detail, as it does when scriptural or other textual sources are used. This category of differences between the two texts seems best explained as an indication of a learned redactor's impulse to gloss the base text.

Another systematic difference is more substantive: the *testo minore* gives greater weight to the divinity of Christ. This is most evident in the treatment of the crucifixion (the two methods of crucifixion appear here, just as they do in the Latin *Meditations*), but it is also present in many other scenes. In the Canonici version, for instance, the Nativity concludes with this simple line: “Now we have spoken about the birth of our lord Jesus Christ.”⁶⁹ The *testo minore* offers this line instead: “You have seen the birth of the most holy Prince Jesus Christ and at the same time the childbirth of the Queen of the world.”⁷⁰ Differences such as this appear to stand as strong evidence that the author of the *testo minore* was not the same person as the author of the Canonici version; such a discrepancy testifies not to a minor modification in style but to divergent affective and theological priorities. It also suggests that the author of the *testo minore* and the subsequent versions was quite intent on rectifying the perceived insufficiencies of the Canonici version. Once again, the question of motives comes into play. It is easy to see why a

redactor—particularly one trained as a preacher, as this redactor seems to have been (for the use of the hortatory voice is this author’s hallmark)—would be concerned to supplement a text’s emphasis on Christ’s humanity with reminders of his kingly and divine nature. It is more difficult to imagine the careful excision of references to Christ’s divinity; to cut such references in a deliberate and systematic way would, it seems, be a consciously daring, potentially heretical act.

The more carefully the Canonici version is compared to the *testo minore*, the more clearly its stylistic integrity and beauty emerge. The Canonici version is more lively, dramatic, and successful in building narrative momentum—free as it is from lengthy didactic passages and quotations from the sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux. It is more consistent in its voice, which is that of gentle invitation (“and here you may see”; “you may consider”) rather than command, as in the *testo minore* (“genuflect to Saint John”).⁷¹ Above all, it exhibits a singleness of purpose in its efforts to generate feelings of intimate love and compassion for Christ.

It does so in many small ways. In the Canonici version, for instance, Mary weeps and sighs profusely when she knows her son is setting out for Jerusalem, where he will be killed. No difference is marked between the kind and degree of her laments and those of Magdalene, her companion in this scene, and the reader is invited to share these affective responses: “Now, if you had seen the mother and Magdalene weeping with such great sighs, perhaps you would not have been able to keep from weeping with them. Now imagine how tormented they must be!”⁷² In the *testo minore*, it is only Magdalene who weeps loudly and with great sighs, while Mary weeps “modestly and softly.”⁷³ In the Canonici version, too, Mary is given a very ample and moving lament when her dead son is laid in her lap. She sighs copiously and kisses the body from head to toe, implicitly inviting the reader to imagine doing the same: “And then she kissed the arms and those most innocent hands which were so cruelly wounded, and the most sacred breast which was opened by that rude lance and from which issued blood and water. And that most holy body, which was so beaten and scourged, and those blessed legs which were whipped so. And then she came to those most blessed feet which were nailed to the cross with the sharpest of nails. And she was not able to stop kissing him.”⁷⁴ In the *testo minore* and subsequent versions, her lament is compressed drastically, and her kisses limited to a decorous few.

Perhaps most tellingly, in terms of its claims to priority as well as its affective character, the Canonici version is the only text containing just one scene of crucifixion: the recumbent, which is described at length with great care and feeling and punctuated by exclamations of pity that both anticipate and script pitying response from the reader:

And then he was led to the place where the cross was laid out. And

there, naked like this, he was brutally taken and stretched out on the cross with many injuries; and then the nails were made ready. And then the crucifiers take the right hand and place it over a hole in the cross, and then they place the nail over the hand and begin to hammer it in. And oh, what great pain that was to the Lord Jesus! And know, too, that every blow of the hammer was a blow of the sword to his most sweet mother. And when they have finished nailing the right hand, they take the left, which does not reach the hole they have made for it. So these wicked men begin to stretch it by force to make it join up to the place they have designated. And so violently do they pull the arm that all the ligaments are stretched... O what great pain does our Lord endure! ... And then they put one foot on top of the other, and with one huge nail they affix them. Now imagine what pain that was!⁷⁵

In this text, too, Christ offers a prayer to the Father accepting the necessity of his death. But the place from which he speaks makes a significant difference. In the *testo minore* and all other versions of the *Meditations*, the prayer is a public proclamation, made before Christ actively extends his arms up to his crucifiers. In the Canonici version, Christ offers the prayer after he has been nailed to the cross, while he lies prone on the ground in a posture of total defeat and submission. The prayer is thus cast as a private communication between Christ and his Father, one that the reader overhears, as it were, and this private resignation to the Father's will increases the pathos of the scene.

What, then, was the generative matrix of the text witnessed by the Canonici manuscript—a text that a Franciscan redactor recognized as valuable but whose compelling affective designs he sought to control with an exegetical frame and in many instances correct or excise?

THE QUESTION OF FEMALE AUTHORSHIP

The institutional affiliation of the author of the Canonici version is not entirely clear. No references here explicitly identify either reader or author as followers of Clare and Francis. There is only one brief mention of Francis, a passage deriving from Bonaventure's *Legenda maior*, and no expression of filial deference or special honor is present in conjunction with it.⁷⁶ It would, of course, be possible for a non-Franciscan to cite a legend of St. Francis, who was after all the most celebrated saint in Italy at the time, just as Franciscans might refer to the works of Bernard of Clairvaux or Augustine (as the Franciscan author of the expanded *Meditations* so confidently does). As potential evidence of the author's affiliation, the single reference to Francis is not conclusive.

At the same time, there is nothing in the Canonici version that would

preclude an identification of its author as Franciscan. Indeed, I believe that this possibility is the most likely, chiefly because of the way poverty figures in the text. Although the ideal of poverty was not espoused exclusively by the Franciscans, the language of poverty in the *Canonici* text often has the ring of a specifically Franciscan idealism. At the end of the chapter on the Visitation, the reader is asked to imitate the poor Virgin, who had neither possessions nor money: “O mirror of poverty, have compassion and strive to love poverty!”⁷⁷ Moreover, Christ seems to be Franciscanized, particularly in the chapter on the Baptism. He walks the long route from Nazareth to the Jordan barefoot (“descalço,” f. 45r), and the author suggests that he made his way by “begging alms from door to door and at night went to sleep in a hostel” (ff. 45r–46r).⁷⁸ Christ is said to have begun to beg early in his career, on the return journey from Egypt: “And then the master of poverty humbly stretched out his hand and meekly received their alms. O soul who has come to the service of God, consider this, and have compassion on your lord, who, to teach you the way to heaven, chose to elect strict poverty like this! Strive, then, to follow him.”⁷⁹ The explicit injunction to the reader to strive to imitate Christ in the practice of voluntary “streta povertade” stands as strong evidence of the Franciscan affiliation of both author and reader.

Promoting a Franciscan ideal of poverty, however, is not the chief aim or achievement of the *Meditations*; its chief goal—like that of the fourth prayer of the *Libellus*, the *Wooing of Our Lord*, and Aelred of Rievaulx’s *Rule of Life for a Recluse*—is to elicit compassionate love for the suffering Christ. Thus, even though the text is likely to have issued from a Franciscan context, I would argue that institutional affiliation was not as important as gender to the genesis of this text, its affective tenor, and its dramatic and stylistic qualities. It has long been known that the *Meditations* was written for a woman; might it have been written—in its first iteration—by one?

A single phrase in the *Canonici* version provides the strongest evidence in my view that it was. In all versions, St. Cecilia is advanced at the outset as a model to be imitated. She is then mentioned again in the middle of the text, at that important transitional point between the Infancy and the Passion. The wording in the *Canonici* version differs from that of other texts. It presents Cecilia, the author, and the reader as brides of Christ: “Ma noi dovemo essere solliciti de quello exempio de Sancta Cecilia de portare sempre le opere del nostro dolce spoxo miser Iesu nel gli chuori nostri” (f. 53r) (We must strive, following the example of Saint Cecilia, to carry always the words and deeds of our sweet spouse Lord Jesus in our hearts). One person is thus mentioning to another in an offhand way that Christ is their spouse—*nostro dolce spoxo miser Iesu*. This phrase appears to indicate that both author and reader were nuns.

In this context, it is important to acknowledge once again that male religious regularly cast Christ as bridegroom in mystical texts and that the relationship between Christ and the Church or the individual soul is

routinely allegorized as marriage in medieval writings. And even in the Canonici version, there are passages that cast the relationship between Christ and a collective “we”—signifying all members of the Church—as a relation between spouses.

But in this instance, as elsewhere in the interpretation of religious women’s texts, it is equally important not to collapse distinctions among the various meanings of the term *spouse*. It is a mistake to assume that all nuptial imagery in religious texts is mystical or allegorical in character or to assume that the metaphorical use of the term *spouse* anywhere in a text necessarily cancels out the literal meanings that the term might hold. Context and nuance are all. And it seems to me that it is a literal semiotic register that is invoked in the phrase *nostro dolce spoxo miser Iesu*. The word *spoxo* is mentioned here in passing; it functions as a simple epithet designating who Christ is in relation to the author and reader. It is a nod to social status. It would seem, then, that one nun is writing for another. That St. Cecilia seems to have functioned as a model of the ideal nun in late medieval Italy—one who rejected an earthly marriage in order to enact a true marriage to Christ—further strengthens this possibility.⁸⁰

The fact that this phrase is not present in the *testo minore* or subsequent versions is also telling. In the *testo minore*, the passage reads, “Ma noi doveremo essere solliciti, ad esempio di santa Cecilia, di portare sempre l’opere di Cristo ne’ cuori nostri” (“But we should try, following the example of Cecilia, to carry always the deeds of Christ in our hearts”).⁸¹ The redactor has thus deliberately suppressed the phrase, *nostro dolce spoxo*. The redactor has nothing against spousal imagery per se; other references, those that cast the relationship between Christ and all Christians as a marriage, are retained. Why then would a redactor delete the phrase *nostro dolce spoxo* from its place in the transitional passage? The simplest explanation is that it did not apply to him. He was not a “spoxo” in the specific sense signified by the term as it is used in this context: as a designation of social status applied to nuns. The presence of the phrase in the Canonici text and its suppression in the *testo minore* appears to indicate that the original author was a nun; the redactor was not.

In terms of historical context, there is no serious barrier to granting that a nun could write a vernacular text such as this. Nuns were often taught to write, as well as to read, in early-fourteenth-century Italy. There is evidence of significant scribal activity among Poor Clares in fourteenth-century Italy, as well as a substantial body of religious writings known to have been composed by women—most notably, by Catherine of Siena, Umiltà of Faenza, Margaret of Cortona, and Angela of Foligno; and as Angela’s case vividly illustrates, women could and did compose through dictation, even when they lacked the technical skill or desire to write.⁸² There is, in addition, the intriguing reference in Ubertino da Casale’s prologue to the *Arbor vitae* which, as we have seen, credits a certain holy woman, Cecilia of Florence,

with instructing him in how to engage in affective meditation on the life of Christ; though fragmentary, this evidence implies that the genre may have had a history of oral composition among female religious in early-fourteenth-century Tuscany.⁸³ Evidence of education and book ownership within the order of the Poor Clares indicate that a nun from this order could well have composed a text like the *Meditations*. Women who entered Clarissan convents in fourteenth-century Italy were often of noble birth and continued to possess books even after entering the convent.⁸⁴ Literacy levels in many convents appear to have been quite high; as Moorman has noted, many licenses for entry “were granted on the grounds that the postulant was an educated girl (*puella litterata*).”⁸⁵

The literary texture of the Canonici version is compatible with a hypothesis that this version was written by a woman. Here, we have evidence of very high intelligence coupled with no traces of formal training in theology. Sources drawn upon could well be available to a Poor Clare. They include, in addition to the gospels, Peter Comestor’s *Historia scholastica*, the *Legenda aurea*, and the *Gospel of Nichodemus*, several sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure’s *Legenda maior*, and the writings of Mechthild of Hackeborn. These sources are never cited by chapter and verse and rarely by author and title. Such a specific practice of citation is unimportant to the author, as it is to many other known women writers from the period, most notably Julian of Norwich. And like Julian’s *Revelation of Love*, this text incorporates material from its sources loosely and briefly—and in paraphrase more than quotation, as if the immediate source is memory rather than a written text. Oral, aural, and visual elements are more strongly influential here than written texts. Sentences are typically paratactic; there is a paucity of hypotactic phrasing here and a paucity more generally of hierarchical thinking of the kind typically taught to boys and men through classical and scholastic texts. Moreover, this author appears to have been steeped in the genre of romance. Constructions of the kind so often used here—“hora torniamo a miser Iesu Cristo” (f. 46r) (“now let’s return to lord Jesus Christ”)—are frequently found in romance (e.g., “now let us leave Tristan and turn to Isolde”); the narrative is at times interrupted by scenes in which action stops so that suspense can be enhanced, detailed visual descriptions offered, or thought processes delineated; and there is, here, the kind of acute interest in intimate human relationships and sensitivity to dialogue and gesture that marks the best romance of the period. These characteristics need not imply that a woman wrote the work, of course, but they are not inconsistent with the possibility.

Finally, the Canonici version fully, yet unselfconsciously, privileges a woman’s point of view—so much so that it seems to come by this point of view honestly, as it were. There is no element of striving here, no sign that it has been an effort to understand a woman’s perspective. That a mother would weep to see her baby in pain, that the Purification should be an event

worth a chapter, that Christ should desire his mother's home cooking after fasting in the desert (f. 51v), that the mother would kiss (rather than merely "look at") the body of her dead son, that the risen Christ would appear first to his mother, greeting her as "madre mia carissima" (f. 111r): that such details come across so convincingly is perhaps because the text was written by a woman. The converse phenomenon—the frequent failure of the Canonici version to register a man's point of view—is also worth noting. No recognition of Joseph's presence is made in many scenes in the Infancy section. It is only Mary, for example, who gives her son "licence" to leave home to travel to the Baptism in the Canonici version (f. 45r); the redactor changes this to "licensed by Mary and Joseph" in the *testo minore*.⁸⁶

Whether or not this argument for female authorship is accepted, the Canonici version was undoubtedly written *for* a woman, and the way it embodies an "incarnational aesthetic" and seeks to generate an intimate, sorrowful form of compassion seems far more deeply related to the gender of its first audience than to its Franciscanness. It is most fittingly placed in a lineage of texts for female religious beginning with the *Libellus*. Indeed, what we can glimpse in the history of this pivotal text is a history of a contested ideology of compassion. A Franciscan attempted to tone down the affective dimensions of this important text, in a gesture that could be called a colonizing and containing of the feminine.⁸⁷ But the *Meditations* remained dialogic in character; and perhaps because of the far greater "vivacity" and emotional power of the original text, it is *that* text—as it survived and was carried along with its copious accretions—that seems to have exerted the stronger affective pull in the later Middle Ages. Many medieval readers, like modern ones, seem to have read the *Meditations* "wishfully," at least if the subsequent adaptations and broad influence of the work are any indication—skimming over the redactor's didactic and reactionary contributions and in effect recreating something close to the original text. For the more lasting legacy of this work was its depiction of a very vulnerable, pitiable Christ; its lasting affective pull that of the original voice, calling upon the reader, "Or pensa che dolore era quello!" (f. 91r) : "Now imagine what pain that was!"

PART II



Performing Compassion in Late Medieval England



Feeling Like a Woman

AROUND THE TIME the anonymous author in Italy sat down to write the original version of the *Meditations*, another momentous event took place across the English Channel: Richard Rolle quit his course of study at Oxford and ran off to the woods to become a hermit, wearing a patchwork garment hastily assembled from two of his sister's dresses. "My brother's gone mad," his appalled sister is said to have declared.¹ It was not shame, however, but lasting honor that was to accrue to the family name. Rolle is typically regarded as a key figure in the development of affective piety in England—not only for the substantial body of Middle English writings that can be securely attributed to him but also for the many devotional works that were misattributed to him in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As the recent republication of Horstmann's *Yorkshire Writers: Richard Rolle and His Followers* attests, the name Rolle functioned as an important cultural signature in late medieval England, carrying with it an imprimatur with special relevance to a new class of lay readers of devotional texts. A number of explanations have been put forward as to why such an imprimatur was so useful.² To these, I would add another. What Rolle authorized was a practice embedded in affective meditation as a genre as it developed in England among a broad array of readers—male as well as female, lay as well as religious: the practice of feeling like a woman.

This chapter advances a simple claim. Compassion, as scripted in and through Middle English meditations on the Passion, is largely a function of gender performance: to perform compassion is to feel like a woman.³ So pervasive is this tacit axiom that it is, I propose, a "robust" feature of the genre; if not absolutely invariant, it is nonetheless one of its most common characteristics, at least as the genre develops in vernacular texts intended chiefly for private devotional use in England. Even as the genre was adapted for a new readership of lay men and women, as well as male religious, it remained deeply inflected by its gendered origins. Many Middle English meditations openly advertise themselves as texts originally written for women. More subtly, they cast their readers in feminine subject positions—especially in the roles of spouse, mother, or feminized man—as a core technique for eliciting compassion.

This chapter will begin with a look at Rolle. Although it would be a

mistake to press the point too far, Rolle's decision to fashion something new from his sister's dresses is suggestive of a more general willingness to engage in feminine self-fashioning. Where Passion meditation is concerned, Rolle not only wrote in response to the perceived needs of women but also generated texts that would, as they circulated in the subsequent centuries, continue to draw on gender as an affective resource, implicitly gendering their readers (male or female) as feminine in order to produce compassionate feeling. This gendering of emotion is part of a much broader pattern in Middle English prose meditations, one whose breadth can only be gestured toward briefly here.⁴ But it is also a phenomenon with interesting depth and complexity, as the most substantial section of this chapter—an extended reading of the most popular and historically significant text of this kind, Nicholas Love's *Mirror*—seeks to demonstrate.

What is at stake in tracing the feminization of compassion in this body of Middle English texts? For one thing, the exposure of a cultural mechanism. To recognize that gender performance became a core mechanism for the production of compassion in late medieval England has a kind of anthropological value, for when placed next to other studies of how compassion is structured in a particular culture (such as the studies of *fago*, *tsewa*, and *eleos* and *oitos* noted earlier), it supplies further evidence that emotional experience is, as Catherine Lutz has put it, “not precultural, but preeminently cultural.”⁵ What is particularly striking about the Middle English context is its apparent paradox. Compassion is presented as an emotion that comes naturally to women, yet both men and women are very openly promised that they can lay claim to this naturally feminine emotion through the artifice of performance: through the performance of devotional scripts, one can “act natural,” like a woman. While the traditional gendering of the soul as feminine *anima* may partially explain this apparent contradiction, it nonetheless remains a puzzle presented by this particular body of English meditative texts.

Related to this apparent paradox, too, is perhaps a richer understanding of the cultural politics of emotion during an era of crisis, for the England that witnessed the emergence of a significant lay readership for affective meditations in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries was also a site of religious and political upheaval. This fact has invited a rich array of historically oriented questions about devotional texts in recent years, questions motivated in large part by the recognition that whatever spiritual economies they are part of, and however private and apparently separated temporally or spatially the context of their use, religious texts are also worldly.⁶ The final section of this chapter will open onto the question of historical use: what ends did the feminized structures of compassion cultivated in and through affective meditations on the Passion serve?

But first, back to the woods, with Rolle.

The framework described in [Part I](#) of this book is a fitting one for understanding how Rolle's texts first came into being. Most of Rolle's Middle English works were written expressly for the use of female religious, and, like so many of the texts we have examined, their original function appears to have been related to marriage making. In the *Ego Dormio*, almost certainly written for Margaret Kirkby on the brink of her entry into the religious life, Rolle explicitly frames her relationship to Christ as one of marriage and offers his work as that of a go-between: "Forthi that I loue the, I wowe the, that I myght haue the as I wold, nat to me, bot to my Lord. I wil becum a messenger to brynge the to his bed that hath mad the and boght the, Crist, the kynges son of heuyn, for he wil wed the if thou wil loue hym."⁷ With this as his stated goal, Rolle goes on to advise his reader to "thynke oft this of his passione" and offers her a firstperson lyric script to use and reuse on a daily basis. This lyric, "My kynge the watyre grete, and the blod he swet," clearly stems from the tradition of affective meditations for women that we have traced. Shortly after it begins, it transports the reader to the time and place of the crucifixion through one of the most distinctive devices in the genre, the switch to the present tense. The reader is cast as lover and compassionate eyewitness, one who beholds the scourging and crowning with thorns and exclaims—in terms that echo the *Wooing of Our Lord*—"alas, my ioy and my swetyng is demed for to henge"(30). This meditation's indebtedness to the tradition of affective writing for women is also evident in its adaptation of lines first appearing in the *Libellus* of John of Fécamp:

Naked his white brest, and rede his bloody side,
 Wan was his faire hewe, his woundes depe and wide.
 In fyve stiddes of his fleisshe the blode kan doun glide
 As stremes done on the stronde; this peyn is not to hide. (30)

Like the *Libellus*, too, this meditation scripts a plea for affective wounding, understood as reciprocal proof of love for the love Christ demonstrated in the Passion:

Ihesu, receyue my hert, and to thi loue me brynge
 In loue thou wound my thought, and lift my hert to the;
 The soul that thou haste boght, thi louer make to be. (31)

"If thou wil thynke this euery day," Rolle promises, "thou shalt fynd gret swetnesse, that shal draw thi hert vp, and make the fal in wepyng and in grete langynge to Ihesu" (31).

The far greater emphasis on Passion meditation in the English works Rolle composed for women, compared with the Latin works he composed for men, has been noted by Nicholas Watson, who—even as he sees Rolle's

lasting achievement as one of securing “authority” in a new literary landscape—locates that authority in a nexus that gives Rolle’s women readers, especially Margaret Kirkby, an instrumental role.⁸ “Indeed,” Watson writes, “Margaret Kirkeby deserves to be seen as a key figure in the development of English spirituality, even in the history of English prose”: “Her friendship with Rolle, and his sense of responsibility towards her, were not the only factor motivating his composition of what seem to have been the first major English guide to the anchoritic life since *Ancrene Wisse* and the first long biblical commentary ever written in English; the scale of both works itself implies his awareness that he was ultimately writing for a wider readership. But it remains likely that without the stimulus of this outstanding friendship, Rolle’s output of English writings would have been, relatively speaking, negligible, a mere footnote to his career, not a chapter in itself.”⁹ Although the immediate context of these remarks is his discussion of *The Form of Living* and *The English Psalter*, Watson elsewhere indicates that the claim made here for the generative pressure of a female audience extends to Rolle’s lyrics and Passion meditations. Watson’s comments on the latter, in fact, could succinctly summarize my argument for the origins of the genre of affective meditation as a whole: “The Passion meditations are not the products of an inner compulsion but of the fact that somebody had need of them.”¹⁰

It is clear, however, that the cast of characters changes in late medieval England: those who have need of vernacular Passion meditations certainly includes, from the mid-fourteenth century on, lay men and women, as well as male religious and clergy. Indeed, Rolle does seem to have anticipated, even as he wrote for Margaret Kirkby, a wider audience—a readership of those who aspired to what came to be called the “mixed life,” in which contemplative practices could be taken up even by laity living out a Christian life primarily in the active mode. As Walter Hilton’s *Epistle on the Mixed Life* suggests, many of those who sought to live mixed lives were men, such as the “worldli lord” to whom Hilton directs his epistle.¹¹ Yet Rolle did not choose to adapt the forms of address or the central metaphors of his affective works: the reader, whether male or female, is thus addressed as sister, or cast as bride, or asked to imagine the Virgin’s compassion as model for feeling compassion for Christ. It is as if Rolle held firm to the image of writing for women and presenting women as models for affective imitation because this gendered structure is what the genre demanded.

Whether or not this was Rolle’s understanding, scribes and readers of Rolle’s works in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries seem to have perceived a meaningful connection between gender and the genre of affective meditation. Manuscripts written even a century or more after Rolle’s death continue to recall the fact that he wrote for women. Longleat MS 29, for instance, contains one of the largest collections of Rolle’s Middle English works. Immediately following a fragment from the Passion

meditation known as *Meditation A*, the manuscript gives a concluding rubric: “Explicit tractatus Ricardi, heremite de Hampolle, ad Margaretam, reclusam de Kyrkby, de amore dei” (68). Given the contents of Longleat 29, as well as inscriptions of several names of men and women, it is highly likely that it was owned by a devout lay family.¹² Yet the rubric genders Rolle’s texts, suggesting, however subtly, that to read them is to engage in a feminine mode of devotion. The other major collection of Rolle’s writings, Cambridge University Library MS Dd. v.64.III, insists several times on recalling the original context of their composition. At the end of *Ego Dormio*, for instance, a scribe has written: “Explicit tractatus Ricardi heremite de Hampole scriptus cuidam moniali de yedingham” (lxvi). The Passion lyrics embedded in that work, along with the advice to use them frequently, are presented anew as having been designed for women, even as they are offered for the use of a mixed readership. But perhaps the most telling example of the tendency to define Rolle’s affective meditations as works designed for women occurs in London, British Library MS Cotton Titus C. xix. This manuscript contains the Passion meditation known as Text II of *Meditation B*, a work that has been described as “the most elaborate and arguably the best of the English Passion meditations.”¹³ It is indeed highly dramatic, intimate, impassioned: “A, swet Ihesu, thou groned ful hard whan hit sate so sore to thy naked body that is so seke, so ful fright of peynes, so febyl and so wery, what by longe and gret fastynge bifore, what with wakyng al the nyght without rest, what with betynge and biffetyng and shameful wordes and dedes byfore. Thy fleishe ther the cros sitteth is skynles and ouer-ron with blode rewes. The peyne of thy birthen greveth the so sore that euche fote that thou gost styngeth to thy hert. Thus thou gost, swet Ihesu, in to Ierusalem toward thy deth” (77). There is good reason to believe, however, that Text II of *Meditation B* was not composed by Rolle, at least not in its final form; the evidence suggests that the elaborate series of similes for which this text is best known—in which Christ’s wounded body is compared to a sky full of stars, a net, a dovecote, a book, a meadow full of flowers and herbs—is only one of many interpolations by a redactor for an unknown audience.¹⁴ Yet the Titus manuscript confidently casts the text as a work written by Rolle for women: “Incipit quedam meditacio passionis ihesu cristi composita a Ricardo Rolle heremita ... sancti moniales de hampul” (xlix). In so doing—in going out on a limb, in other words, to present possibly fictional circumstances as fact—this rubric implicitly defines affective meditation on the Passion as a genre designed for women. Moreover, the fact that this rubric appears as an *incipit* sends a signal to the reader, whether male or female, that he or she is entering into a kind of reading experience rooted in women’s practices.

Even without such rubrics, the Passion meditations attributed to Rolle often seek to feminize their readers. Text I of *Meditation B* not only returns repeatedly to Mary as the exemplar of compassion but also scripts

impassioned pleas, such as the following: “A, lady.... gyf me of thi sykynges [sighings] that sykest so sore, that I may syke with the, that began that woo. I aske not, dere lady, kastelys nor towrys ne other worldys wele, the sonne nor the mone ne the bryght sterrys, but woundys of reuthe is al my desyr, peyne and compassoun of my lord Ihesu Cryst.... A, lady ... soue in myn herte, that is hard os ston, a sparcle of compassoun of that dere passoun, a wounde of that reuthe to souple it with.”¹⁵ This text also contains a phrase that—in its striking use of the word *playe*—suggests an awareness of the affective efficacy of gendered role playing: “Lady ... grawnte me of thi grace a syght of thi sorewe, a poynt of thi peyne to playe me with.”¹⁶

Moreover, at the climactic moment of the same *Meditation*, the crucified Christ speaks “so swetely and so mekely” to the reader as bride, in terms that, while drawing on the *Improperia Christi* tradition, possess the intimacy of tone and emotional pull of the lover-knight allegory in the *Ancrene Wisse*: “My swete, what haue I the don? haue I the wratthyd, that thou dost me this woo? haue I not geuyn the al my self, and al that euere thou hast, and lyf with-owten ende yef thou it wyl take, my body to thi foode, and to deth on rode, and hyght the al my-selue in heuene to thi mede? haue I with my gode ded hyrtyd the so sore, or with my swete dauntynge greuyd thin herte?”¹⁷ “Swete dauntynge”: when the Passion is cast in these terms, compassion is given a distinct structure, valence, and flavor. It is cast as an intimate, eroticized response yielded by a woman to the lover who has so assiduously courted her.

GENDER AND A MIDDLE ENGLISH GENRE

Like Rolle’s texts, many Middle English meditations cast the reader as feminine by preserving the direct address to the female audience for whom the text was originally intended.¹⁸ Both of the fifteenth-century Middle English translations of Aelred of Rievaulx’s *De institutione inclusarum*, for instance, address the reader as “suster” throughout, and this feminine addressee is assumed to feel pity naturally and inevitably when she enters imaginatively into the drama of the Passion. “Suster, I whot wel that pyte okepyd now al thyn herte, sorwe and compassioun hath set alle thy boweles aviere,” the text reads; and later, “I am siker, suster, thu might not longe suffre this, thu might not suffre his comly ryg be so to-torn wit schurges, his gracious face to be bouyd wit bofattes, his wurschipful heed to be corouned with scharpe thornes to the brayn.”¹⁹ It may well be that the translators retained Aelred’s address to a woman because their intended audiences were female. But even if the original recipients of the translations were women, it is virtually certain that the Middle English texts were read by lay men as well. The translations survive in two manuscripts for which there is evidence of a mixed lay readership.²⁰

Another instance in which the rhetorical figure of the female addressee

is maintained occurs in the *Meditations on the Supper of Our Lord and the Hours of the Passion*, a partial translation and adaptation of the *Meditationes vitae Christi*. The work is addressed to a mixed “congregacyun,” and the two manuscripts in which it survives suggest that it was also used in private meditations by lay readers, not necessarily female.²¹ Yet, at the moment of greatest pathos, when the Virgin holds the dead Christ in her lap, members of the audience are addressed as “women” at the beginning of a moving lament inviting participation in grief: “Now ye gode wymmen, seeth, with youre yen, / Yyf thyr be any sorowe lyke vnto myn.”²² Thomas of Hales’ *Lyf of Our Lady* also casts its audience as women: “But I prey you, whateuer modris ye ben, thenke ye mor ententifly and parceiue ye more diligently, with whiche sorwes the Virgin was pushed”; yet the two surviving copies were owned by lay men.²³ The *Speculum Devotorum*, which consists of a partial translation of the *Meditations* along with other devotional material, begins with a direct address to a woman: “gostly syster in Ihesu Cryste.”²⁴ And the *Seven Poyntes of Trewe Wisdom* begins with an address from the translator to “my moste worschipful lady”—an address that is retained in several copies of the work, even though they circulated among mixed audiences of men and women.²⁵

In addition to the use of direct address to a female audience, this group of writings feminizes the reader by fostering identification with Christ’s mother. The genre is so insistent that the reader learn to perform the events of the Passion like a mother that many of the Middle English Passion meditations take the form of extended laments of the Virgin, often set in the context of the life of the Virgin rather than her son. Thomas of Hales’s *Lyf of Our Lady*, Thomas Hoccleve’s “Lamentacioun of the Grene Tree, Complaynyng of the Losyng of Hire Appill,” and several anonymous texts—the prose *Complaint of Our Lady*, the prose “Lamentacion of Oure Lady,” and two verse narratives, “St. Mary’s Lamentation to St. Bernard” and “De arte lacrimandi”—are examples of this form.²⁶ Of these, the last is particularly interesting, not only in its assertion that compassionate response is something learned—weeping is an art, or a “craftfull thyng”—but in its insistence that assuming the character of a mother is the best way to learn this art.²⁷ Each of the events of the Passion is related through the voice of the Virgin, who punctuates her narrative with an insistent command to the reader: “Come learn to weep from me.” As the reader follows her through the Passion, a mother’s perspective becomes the medium through which all of Christ’s torments are filtered—so much so that the scourging is defined as an “unmotherly” act, one whose horror derives from its transgression of maternal care: “They buffete hym unmoderly / Which was my barne and all my blysse.”²⁸ In this context, the adoption of maternal identity is advanced as a promising constraint: “I coude not ellis but cry and yarme. / Therfor to wepe come lerne att me.”²⁹

The affective utility of imagining the self as bride of Christ is held to be

equally effective in Middle English prose meditations. As we have seen, the image of the bride of Christ could hold literal significance for female religious, and Middle English meditations, when used by female religious, are likely to have been understood as tools for scripting feelings that could aid in the enactment of a legal marriage to Christ. But in the context of devotional reading by men and women in the mixed life, the image of the spouse functions metaphorically: it is an enabling, fictive image, a role readers are invited to perform in order to cultivate compassionate response. Here as elsewhere, the image functions as a form of “emotional common sense,” ostensibly without need of explanation or analysis: the image is assumed to speak for itself.³⁰ In the Middle English translations of Aelred’s *Rule of Life*, for instance, the reader—male or female—is cast as Christ’s bride for the duration of the reading experience; the reader is prompted to follow Christ “thi spouse” and “thyn husbounde” through all the events of the Passion.³¹ Many passages in the *Prickynge of Love*, the popular devotional text attributed to Walter Hilton, also suggest that the reader play the role of Christ’s spouse. The narrator advises the reader whose heart is “hard & dryye with-owtn steryng of loue or of compassioun” to imagine the self as bride: “& thenk that he that is thi dere spouse, thi loue, disire of thi soule, solas of aungelis, blisse of holi soulis, & sone of the heuenly Fadir wold for the loue of the ... suffre in his bodi so vn-sufferable peynes. This remedie is mikel worth for to sterie a drighe buystouys herte to tendirnesse of compassioun.”³²

The assumption that playing the role of bride will naturally elicit “tendirnesse of compassioun” is perhaps most fully developed in *A Talkyng of the Loue of God*. Based on the *Wooing of Our Lord* and *An Orison of God Almighty*, this fourteenth-century text survives in the Vernon and Simeon manuscripts, which are generally thought to have had mixed audiences. Moreover, judging from internal evidence—the use of masculine pronouns in several passages, for instance—its editor observes that “it was meant for men, or in any case not exclusively for women.”³³ Yet the drama scripted here is one in which the reader performs the role of woman, chooses Christ as spouse, and utters lyrical exclamations of love and pity. In the Passion section, the reader is situated at Calvary and asked to recite words such as these: “Ah, my deore lemmon, he bereth the roode tre on his bare scholdre for the loue of me. His bodi is so tendre, his bones longe and lene, al stoupynde he goth that del hit is to seone. A, mi swete lemmon, the dundes that thei smyhte the, the serwe that thei don the, on vche asyde thei threste the forthward vnwrestly cryynde hidously to thi deth hastily. Al thou tholest louely for me wrecche vnworthi.”³⁴ In such passages, the pathos emerges not only from the conceit that Christ died in order to prove his love to his specially chosen *lemmon*, the particular reader who performs this script, but from the contrast between the beauty of Christ’s body and the ugliness inflicted on it. The reader performing *A Talkyng* is guided toward a

specific way of viewing the suffering victim—as object of desire whose beauty is being destroyed. The reader laments that his “louely lour, that was so briht and so cleer, was al to-fouled and i-schent”; his arms, “white and louely” are “streyned so streytly”; his “swete bodi” is “so cold and so blodi, al rau and wori.”³⁵

NICHOLAS LOVE’S *MIRROR*

There is no doubt that Nicholas Love intended his translation of the *Meditationes vitae Christi* to be read by a mixed audience of lay men and women, as well as by religious men and women for whom Latin presented an obstacle: in his prologue, he writes that his aim is to provide spiritual nourishment “in Englyshe to lewde men & women & hem that bene of symple vndirstondyng.”³⁶ Throughout, a sense of what he believes to be appropriate for this general audience governs his handling of the text: he eliminates most of the passages on the cloistered life, references to the Franciscan Order, and other passages that would not be relevant to the mixed readership he envisioned.³⁷ Yet while Love was aware that both male and female readers would take up this text, he establishes at the very outset a core proposition: this text was written for a woman, he declares; prepare to read it, prepare to feel it, like a woman.

It is through the *Mirror*’s unusual “double prologue” that this principle is introduced as a tacit corollary of affective reading. For in addition to his own prologue, Love preserves the original prologue addressed to the Poor Clare for whom “Bonaventure” wrote. The result is striking, not only because translators and adaptors during this period often omit prologues from their originals, replacing them with remarks addressed to the new audience of the revised text, but also because Love’s own practice in Englishing his source is marked by great economy. He cuts entire passages and episodes with abandon: he omits many of the chapters on the public ministry, for instance, and eliminates the lengthy theological digressions that he did not see as appropriate for readers unfamiliar with the subtleties of high theology and doctrine. Through such bold excision, Love reduces his original by more than a third, a fact for which he expresses no compunction. Thus, Love’s retention of the original prologue cannot be explained as a slavish following of his source or a mark of reverence for the words of his *auctor*. Rather, his practice of excising the extraneous strongly suggests that the prologue addressed to a woman was recognized as an integral part of the structure of the text—a load-bearing wall, one that could not be sacrificed without compromising the way the meditations work.

Medieval prologues are crucial indicators of a text’s intended function; it is here, at the beginning, that the most significant directions are given for how a text is to be experienced.³⁸ In the rhetorical *ductus* of meditative texts, prologues provide a point of entry that profoundly influences the way the

text is engaged and performed. As Mary Carruthers observes, close attention to *ductus*—"the way(s) that a composition guides a person to its various goals"—is one of the chief methods of recovering "the most apparently ephemeral of performance phenomena, and least amenable to academic study, its affects and moods."³⁹ Like the meditative writings in the monastic tradition described by Carruthers, the body of Love's *Mirror* is an "open" text—one that can be performed at the reader's pace; various parts will be "stopped at and stayed in mentally" (or affectively), and "choice"—which passages to choose on subsequent readings—is presumed.⁴⁰ Love explicitly extends this invitation to choose. At the conclusion of the work, he writes that "it semeth to me beste that euery deuout creature that loueth to rede or to here this boke, take the partes therof as it semeth moste comfortable & stiryng to his deuocion" (220). But this openness is framed within the sturdy walls established by the double prologue.

Love not only frames his own prologue with the assertion that this text was first written for a woman, mentioning this gendered history at the beginning and end of his introduction; the second of these two references frames the entire text as words spoken to a woman: "Forthermore fort speke of the profitable matire of this boke, the forseide clerke Bonaventure spekyng to the woman forseide in his proheme bygynneth in this manere sentence" (11). The whole of the *Mirror* is thus presented chiefly as citation, as if uttered to a woman in the voice of Bonaventure, with certain asides uttered in Love's own voice to his English audience.⁴¹ In Love's hands, then, the fact that the text was written for a woman becomes more than a curious relic from the text's past. It is presented in this new context as an enabling performance position, an imaginative postulate that Love's male and female readers are asked to accept as a condition of admission to the text and a means of gaining its affective fruits. Addressed first as men and women by Love, then as a woman in the pseudo-Bonaventure's prologue, Love's male and female readers are inducted into the state that the rest of the text will rely on, subtly but persistently: feeling like a woman.

And from the beginning, the invitation to enter into the meditative experience like a woman is somatized, just as it is in Love's source text. Readers are asked to imagine themselves having the body of a woman and to read, imagine, meditate, and feel as if with a female body:

Amonge other vertuese commendynge of the holy virgine Cecile it is writen that she bare alwey the gospel of criste hidde in her breste, that may be undirstand that of the blessed lif of oure lord Jesu criste writen in the gospele, she chace certayne parties most deuoute. In the which she set her meditacion & her thouht night & day with a clene & hole herte. And when she hade so fully alle the manere of his life ouer gon, she began agayne. And so with a likyng & swete taste gostly chewyng in that manere the gossell of crist she set & bare it

euer in the priuyte of her breste. In the same manere I conseil that thou do. (11)

Much depends on this passage, given its picture of exemplary affective reading and its direct interpellation of the reader. It contains an interesting conflation of meanings: “she bare alwey the gospel of criste hidde in her brest” can mean that Cecilia always carried a small book, an anthology of the “most deuoute” parts culled from the gospels, next to her breast; or it can mean that she knew the gospels by heart and meditated on them repeatedly. The two meanings are linked in a way that suggests that having—or imagining that one has—a woman’s breasts is itself a kind of resource, an advantage in the practice of affective meditation. The reference to Cecilia’s book seems to be an allusion to the small gospel books in use especially among female religious in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—books whose portability (they could indeed be carried next to the breast) and softness (a feature of the “uterine vellum” from which they were typically made) served to enhance the affective and sensual dimensions of devotional reading.⁴² Thus, in addition to the familiar ungendered monastic trope for *lectio divina*, that of eating the words of the gospel, this passage presents a decidedly gendered model: meditative reading is figured as an embodied reading practice in which the life of Christ (Christ the infant, Christ the lover), as recorded in the book nestled next to female breasts, is lovingly taken in to the inner breast, where it is held and carried always. Reading with feeling—reading as *imitatio Cecilie*—is a practice ideally experienced as sensual, affective intimacy between a female lover and Christ.

The first three chapters continue the process of initiation into feminine identity through the use of inscribed readers as figures to be imitated. In quick succession, the text offers four exemplary practitioners of affective prayer, all of them associated with books, all of them women. In addition to Cecilia and to the Poor Clare for whom Bonaventure wrote, we encounter Elizabeth of Hungary, whose revelations are quoted in [Chapter 2](#) (19–22), and the Virgin Mary, whose affective meditations on the prophecy in *Isaiah* (23) serve as the prelude to the rapturous, sensual knowledge that she has conceived a child: “oure lady fulfilled & enflaumed with the holi gost, & in the loue of god more brennyng then she was before, felyng that she hade conceyued, kneled don & thonked god of that grete gifte” (28).

In addition to presenting these women as models for imitation, the *Mirror* casts the reader as a woman by more subtle means. One of these is the use of space. As critical studies in spatial practices and poetics have demonstrated, medieval places and spaces were often both gendered and gendering. The coding of certain spaces as masculine, others as feminine, not only reflects cultural practices; such codes also affect those who enter those spaces, imparting something of their gendered character to the male or female person.⁴³ Just such an imparting of gender through space occurs in

the early chapters of the *Mirror*. The Infancy narrative consistently invites the reader into spaces coded as feminine, thereby inviting the reader to feel like a woman. One of the most striking instances of this implicit invitation occurs in the chapter on the Incarnation. In the opening scene of this chapter, the Virgin is depicted “in hire pryue chaumbure that tyme closed & in hir prayeres” (23). The reader is then directed to enter this space: “Take hede & haue in mynde as thou were present in the pryue chaumbur of our lady” (24). To take up this invitation is to enter a gendered and potentially gendering sanctum. For in addition to what other sources suggest about the feminizing potential of this intimate space, the *Mirror* itself asserts that masculine identity must be checked at the door. The Virgin herself has locked men out. We discover this when Gabriel glides into the room: “Gabriel than entred in to Maries chaumbure that was stoken fro men bot not fro angeles” (24). The word *men* can, of course, be interpreted to mean “human beings,” and this reading finds support through the contrast with angels. But social custom among women of high birth—the practice of locking the door of the privy chamber as protection from male intruders—lends semantic weight to the gender-specific meaning of the term.⁴⁴ Men are explicitly denied entry to this chamber, yet the reader is invited in and is assumed to be able to do so with no sense of trespass.

And this scene is not unique: throughout the Infancy narrative the reader is frequently positioned as a woman in woman’s space. The reader is called on to accompany the Virgin wherever she goes: to sit with her and the pregnant Elizabeth, listening in on their intimate girl talk as they relate to each other the “manere of hire conceyuyng” (32); to be present with her in that quintessential woman’s space, the birth chamber, when John the Baptist is born (33); or to stand with her behind the curtain of the temple, listening from an area reserved for women as men perform the rites of circumcision for the infant John (33).⁴⁵

The early chapters of the *Mirror* also initiate the reader into feminine identity through inviting identification with Mary; indeed, the imitative practice this text fosters can best be described not as *imitatio Christi* but as *imitatio Mariae*. Like the thirteenth-century nuns and beguines whose devotional practices Rosemary Hale has analyzed so perceptively, the readers of Love’s *Mirror* are invited to imagine themselves in the Virgin’s place, sharing her maternal ways of seeing and responding to the life of her son.⁴⁶

The episode of the infant Christ’s circumcision provides a particularly vivid illustration. The circumcision is presented as one of the most important moments in the early life of Christ, for it prefigures the Passion; in Love’s words, “this day oure lord Jesus began to shede his precieuse blode for oure sake. He began betyme to suffre for vs, & he that neuer dide synne began this day to bere payne in his swete tendire body for oure synne” (42). As the details of this ritual are related—“his tendere flesh was kut, with a sharp

stonen knife" (42)—the reader is enjoined to pity the naked and vulnerable infant who feels pain and weeps as naturally as any other child: "Miche owht we to haue compassion & wepe with him, for he wept this day ful sore" (42). But the text does not rely on this direct injunction to feel as much as on the strategy of inviting identification with the child's mother. The reader is asked to feel Christ's pain as inevitably as she does: "When she sey hir louely sone wepe she might not withhold wepyng" (42). Compassionate feeling is not presented as a natural *human* response, the kind of response that any human being has or ought to have at the sight of another human being's pain. It is resolutely represented as a mother's response. The contrast between the Virgin's response and that of the men in the scene makes this point clear. The men surrounding the child and performing the rite exhibit no signs of emotion, no signs of pity (even though it might seem that they should, having special knowledge of the male child's pain by virtue of shared anatomy). Stoics in a drama seeking affective response, these men serve to underscore the message that the reader should not feel like a man. Through them, the reader is asked not to perform a man's part, not to assume a place in masculine company, not to see the event itself as men do—as a male initiation rite to be celebrated. Instead, the reader is asked to assume a woman's part (a role thoroughly conflated here with the maternal) by sharing the Virgin's point of view and feelings of maternal solicitude for her weeping child.

Encouraged to identify with the Virgin, invited into spaces coded as feminine, presented with feminine models of affective meditation, and addressed as a woman in the double prologue, the reader of the *Mirror* is initiated into the fiction of femininity within the first few chapters of the Infancy section. By the time the Passion section opens the practice of affective meditation is already conflated with gender performance. What is developed more fully in the Passion chapters is the link between feminine identity and compassion—a link that depends not only on the reader's identification with the Virgin and other female figures in the text but also more specifically on learning to see, or more pointedly to behold, like a woman.

BEHOLDING

Visualization is a fundamental aspect of the meditative process in the *Mirror*; reading is virtually synonymous with seeing, as the reader is constantly asked to visualize Christ's sufferings in vivid detail.⁴⁷ But, curiously, the extent to which the *Mirror* presents certain ways of seeing as gendered forms of perception has gone unremarked. Close attention to the language of seeing in this text illuminates one of the important mechanisms through which a pervasive cultural assumption is formed: the assumption that seeing like a woman enables or facilitates feelings of compassion and grief. Seeing

like a man, in this text, not only leads to a stoic restraint or lack of response to Christ's sufferings but also to the kind of aggression and cruelty that caused Christ's pain.

Throughout the Passion section, the reader is asked to accompany the Virgin, witnessing most of the events—the journey to Calvary, the stripping of Christ, the crucifixion, Christ's suffering and death on the cross, the deposition—from her point of view. And seeing from this point of view does more than position the reader in a prime location close enough to observe the details of Christ's pain; it fosters a way of seeing that is qualitatively different from other modes of perception, one that is specifically cast as maternal. "Now forthermore beholde" (173), the text continually exhorts; and in this command the reader is asked to imitate the compassionate gaze of the Virgin, who "turnede neuer hir eyene fro him" (176). A strong sense of necessity is established through such rhetoric. Just as she cannot help feeling anguish at the sight of her suffering son, so too the reader is given the promise that, in imitating her mode of gazing, compassionate response will come easily: "His sorouful modere ... sette hir done by side the crosse, & beholdeth piteuously hir dere sone so ferd with.... Thou also if thou beholde wele thi lorde, thou maiht haue here matire ynouh of hye compassion, seyng him so tormentede" (178–79). This maternal gaze is, of course, a historically contingent representation. Love is thoroughly of his time in depicting the Virgin's mode of seeing in terms inimical to those promoted by the early Church Fathers; Ambrose, for instance, writes that the Virgin "gazed with pious eyes [spectabat piis oculis] on the wounds of her son, through whom she knew that the future redemption of all would be achieved."⁴⁸

In the *Mirror*, the Virgin does not simply see; she beholds. And this is what the reader is enjoined to do throughout the *Mirror*'s scenes of suffering. "Now beholde him with sorowe of herte" (169); "now with inwarde compassion beholde him here" (171); and so on. *Beholding* is clearly a key word in Love's *Mirror*. What I want to suggest here is that it is also a keyword in the sense proposed by Raymond Williams—that it embeds and scripts a culturally specific "structure of feeling"—and that it does so in an even more fundamental way (and by this I mean a more fully embodied way) than Williams' prescient phrase suggests.⁴⁹ In its original context, this Middle English term may have functioned as a mechanism for generating sensory perception itself: for generating a specific way of seeing, in other words, that had the potential for producing—in the body, as well as in the mind—an impulse toward a particular form of compassion: the protective and ameliorative action of holding. To investigate the term *beholding*, in short, can lead us into the realm of historical phenomenology, prompting a closer questioning of how sensory perception itself may have been shaped and experienced in the past.⁵⁰

Despite the acute and copious attention to viscosity in medieval culture,

and to its specific effects in devotional literature in particular, *beholding*—as a distinct, Middle English way of seeing—has yet to be given serious scholarly attention. *Beholding* has typically been treated as a synonym for *seeing*, *gazing*, *looking*, *regarding*, *paying attention to*.⁵¹ And indeed, the *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*) supplies many instances in which it appears to be used interchangeably with these other terms for seeing; Chaucer, for example, often uses *behold* in the simple, uninflected or unmarked sense of “see” or “look at.” Attending to this term and its contexts, however, suggests that Middle English *behold* carries, as one of its distinct meanings, the sense of seeing empathetically. This sense is gestured toward by the *MED*, which offers as one of its definitions of *biholden*, “to turn one’s thoughts (to sth), pay attention; look (after), be solicitous (about), protect.”⁵² But the *MED* does not advance this definition of the verb as important or prevalent. Even dictionaries are fallible, however, and scrutiny of the many examples and definitions for *biholden* and related terms (*biholding*, *biholdere*, *biholdingli*) reveals further examples of specifically empathetic beholding that are not drawn out as such in the *MED*, but are categorized under definitions that fail to recognize the empathetic activity embedded in the term. The *MED*’s leading definition for *biholden*—“to fix or keep one’s eyes (on sth.), look (at), gaze (upon)” —includes as illustration a line from a devotional lyric, “Hi sike ... wan hic ... bi-holde a-pon the tre,” and another from a romance, “Sche biheld opon that frely fode” (1a [a]). Reading these lines with care and within their contexts indicates that they include—at their core, I would suggest (as much as any term can be said to embed a meaning at its core)—the sense of gazing empathetically upon.

In fact, if we are willing to engage in some experimental lexicography, an alternative *MED* entry could easily be constructed.⁵³ Julian of Norwich alone (whose writings are not drawn upon by the compilers of the *MED* entry for *biholden*) supplies abundant examples. Julian’s use of this word—her assumptions about its qualitative, functional difference from *seeing* or *looking*—appears to me to be responsible for generating some of her most profound theological insights.⁵⁴ The close proximity of *beholding* to forms of holding or *becleping* in Julian reveals, I think, a fourteenth-century assumption that to “behold” is to see empathetically because it is also “to hold”: to hold with the eyes.

This assumption stems in part from the etymology of the word. Middle English *biholden* derives from the Old English *be-healden*, which derives in turn from *healden*, “to hold.” In the Anglo-Saxon period, it does not seem to have been the case that “holding with the eyes” implied empathetic, protective, or ameliorative holding.⁵⁵ Rather, *beholding* in Anglo-Saxon seems to carry a sense of possession in the acquisitive sense: of wishing to possess, to take in to the mind and lock it up there. The movement is that of taking in rather than reaching out. The “holding” that is part of *behold* takes on a protective, ameliorative sense in early Middle English, and it is

flourishing by the time Julian of Norwich is writing. Moreover, it implies a movement outward: it appears to function as a prompt to reach out and hold.⁵⁶

What makes the Middle English verb *biholden* even more interesting is the ethical imperative it carries. The *MED* lists as one of its definitions “to be in duty bound, be under obligation, be indebted;—often with inf. phrase, or with *to, onto* phrase” (5). The *MED* does not suggest that there is a connection between this meaning and the meanings that have to do with vision. But the examples supplied by the *MED* strongly suggest that it is because those who behold see in a specific way—empathetically—that there is an attendant obligation. “To behold” thus seems to be a distinct way of seeing and feeling that is coded simultaneously as an ethical imperative. As its frequent use in meditations on the Passion suggests, beholding is understood to be something that can be cultivated through practice, and a primary strategy for learning to behold is to practice performing “woman.”

To return, then, to the *Mirror*: beholding is clearly advanced as a mode of perception that women are thought to be particularly good at, but the text does not locate this ability in a concept of woman’s essence. Rather, the repeated practice of holding Jesus (as infant, child, then grown man) in a protective or loving way is what produces the perceptive habit of “beholding” him, which in turn produces an impulse to hold in an ameliorative embrace. It is part of the *Mirror*’s performative work to ask the meditator to imagine holding Jesus just as the Virgin holds him. In scenes before to the Passion, the *Mirror* seeks to give the reader an imagined, felt experience of holding that body, and this technique is one through which the *Mirror* establishes a foundation for compassionate beholding when the body of Christ is stripped, beaten, and nailed on the cross.

In addition to the Virgin, Mary Magdalene functions as a model of compassionate beholding in the *Mirror*. After the deposition, she gazes at the feet of Christ: “She helde the feete & lokede vpon hem wepyng & alle mooste failyng for sorowe. And riht as she before in his life, weshe hem with teres of compunction, now miche more she washeth hem with teres of grete sorowe & inwarde compassion ... she louede mikel, & therfore she wept mykele” (184). The word *helde* in this passage could mean “held” or “beheld,” given that the latter verb was often shortened in the past tense. This ambiguity itself indicates the logic at work: to see with the eyes of a lover leads to a tender regard similar to that of the mother’s gaze on her beloved child. In each case, the physicality of the human being is foregrounded; the destruction of flesh and sinew is all the more pitiable because the body itself has been lovingly held.

The gendered dimensions of the compassionate gaze become even more apparent when compared to other visual modes in the Passion chapters. The Father’s way of seeing, for instance, contrasts sharply with that of the Virgin. The Father witnesses all the torments his son endures: “Ye seene

nowe in what anguish is his soule," the Virgin prays to him; "I beseke Yow that Yhe wille ese his peynes" (176). Yet the sight of such suffering does not move him to spare his son this pain. For he sees through the suffering to the fulfillment of a larger, abstract good—the salvation of mankind. In the Father's economy, the son's flesh gains value precisely by being destroyed. Thus, the Virgin's mode of seeing is not defined as parental but specifically maternal; the Father can gaze on the events of the Passion and, seeing them in the context of a larger picture that justifies the bloodshed, remain impassive. But crucially, even this sharp distinction—maternal/paternal—has embodied practices at its foundation. The Father does not hold his son before the Passion; he does not experience sensually or somatically his son's flesh. It is only at the moment of Christ's death that the Father says, "I wole not that thou be more tormentede, & therfore come nowe, for I shale clippe the with myn armes & take the in to my bosome" (178)—a bosom that has no substance. And even though the Father's point of view is the "correct" one, theologically speaking, it is not validated in the *Mirror*; here, the Father is portrayed as the one who orchestrates and underwrites the violence that the *Mirror's* reader is repeatedly asked to experience affectively as wrong. Like the Virgin, who laments "thi fadere wolde not helpe the, & I miht not" (185) and "his fadere almighty wolde not socoure him" (187), the reader is asked to perceive the Father's masculine mode of seeing, which permits so much pain, as a mode to be questioned and indeed resisted. Far more pitiless is the mode of perception in which Christ's body is not the instrument of the Father's will but an object of sport. The cruelty that this way of seeing permits—unjustified by any abstract scheme of good—is obvious. What often goes unrecognized is the fact that it is male figures who represent this way of seeing in Love's *Mirror* and its analogues. Men are not only the torturers but also the spectators who relish the sight of this body being tortured. Significantly, in the *Mirror's* language, they are "lokers" rather than beholders. In the passage on the scourging, for instance, the reader is told to "beholde him with sorowe of herte, namely when thei smitene him greuously & oft sithes vpon the hede, ful of sharpe thornes, the whech persede greuously in to the brayne panne" (169). The torturers and spectators look on Christ with an intensity equal to that of the Virgin, but their kind of looking is qualitatively different. Christ in their hands is "betene & scourgete with wonde vpon wonde & brisoure vpon brisour, til both the lokeres & the smyters were yere" (169).

Such "dispitous" looking is later described as the mode of vision of the men who condemn Christ. When Pilate sentences him, the powerful men of the city—"princes & the pharisees & the aldermenne"—are joyful and glad (170); "thei be not mouede to pite for his innocence, & that is more cruelte in hem, thei be not slakede nor withdrawen fro hir malice by the grete despites & pyne that thei haue seene & done to him before, bot laghen & maken ioy, & scornene him that is verrey godde" (170). As Christ makes his way

through the streets of Jerusalem to Calvary, the women of the city behold him as a mother's son and grieve, and the reader is positioned as if in their company through the word *behold* (171–73). In contrast, the crowd “wonders” at and scorns him as spectacle: “Now forthemore beholde thi lorde Jesu, so goyng forthe with his crosse on his bake, & how thanne out of the cite at alle gates rennene bothe cutesenes & strangeres of alle degres, not onely gentiles, but also the foulest Ribawdes & wyne drinkeres, not to haue compassion of him, bot to wondre vpon him, & scorne him. There is none that wole knawe him by pitevous affeccion” (173). After the death of Christ, the *Mirror* presents an even starker contrast between feminine beholding and the pitiless mode of seeing aligned with men. The Virgin and her companions, still grieving at the foot of the cross, see a group of armed men galloping toward them from the city. In language notable for its conflation of aggression with masculinity, we are told that the sight of suffering—far from acting as a restraint to violence—spurs these men to even greater cruelty: “Than comene thoo forseide armede [men] to hem with grete wodenes & grete noys, & seyng the thefes yit lyuyng, with gret yre thei hewene & breken despitesly hir legges & so slewen hum, & kast hem anone into sume dike there nihe beside, & after turnede hem ayeyn & come towarde oure lorde Jesu” (180).⁵⁷ When the Virgin kneels before the men and attempts to convert them to her protective, compassionate way of seeing, they respond by reasserting their perception of Christ's body as an object to be acted upon with weapons. Longinus, “despisyng hir wepyng & praieres, with a sharpe spere opunede the side of oure lorde Jesu, & made a grete wonde” (180).

This is not to say that the *Mirror* presents all men as cruel and unfeeling, incapable of pitying response. There are male figures who do behold and weep and thus potentially function as models for identification. But with the important exception of John the Evangelist, whose exemplary function we will explore later, men consistently inhabit the margins of the *Mirror's* affective scenes—and their mode of seeing and feeling is mediated through the feminine. Instead of gazing directly on Christ himself, they behold the Virgin, perceiving Christ's sufferings only as they are reflected through her grief.⁵⁸ After Christ has been laid in the tomb, for example, the Virgin and her entourage of women process through the streets of Jerusalem. We are told that “maidenes & gude matrones” come from all parts of the city to join her in an expression of feminine solidarity for the loss of her Son (187). The grief of these women for the death of Christ is shared only indirectly by the “gude menne” of the city, who witness the Virgin's distress as she goes by and “hade grete compassion of hir, & were stired to wepyng”(187).

With Joseph of Arimathea and Nichodemus, this triangulated structure of compassion is even more obvious. Their *capacity* for feeling is clearly revealed when they first appear at Calvary: meeting John, “thei clippede othere with wepyng teres & miht not speke to othere a grete while for tendirnes of compassion & sorowe” (182). But this encounter occurs at a

distance from the cross, hidden from view. The implication that masculinity inhibits, or ought to inhibit, the direct, public expression of compassion and sorrow is borne out in the scene that follows. Both Joseph and Nichodemus adopt an attitude of stoic restraint as soon as they join the company of grieving women at the foot of the cross. The burden and privilege of mourning are yielded to the women; from this moment forward, Joseph and Nichodemus behold and feel vicariously through them and express their grief by indirect means—through seeking to serve the women and alleviate their distress. The chief task they perform, taking the body down from the cross, is cast in this light. It is above all a service performed for the grieving mother, accomplished with great care and solicitude for her feelings. As Joseph and Nichodemus extract the bloody nails from Christ's palms and feet, for instance, they seek to hide them from the Virgin's sight: their knowledge of the affective power of the sight of these gruesome instruments of torture is transmuted from something that should elicit pitying response from themselves to something that should elicit such response from the mother.

A striking visual example of such mediation at the scene of the Deposition appears in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Barlow 22 (early fourteenth century; see [Figure 7](#)). Here, Joseph of Arimathea's body and that of the Virgin are conflated, as if the Virgin's body is needed to license Joseph's embrace of Christ's body. Further, the grouping of the heads is literally in the shape of a triangle, and only the Virgin touches Christ's body, while Joseph holds the body through the mediation of the cloth so that his hands do not touch Christ's flesh. There is a potent intimacy in Joseph's embrace of Christ: note the way Christ's head rests on Joseph's; the way Christ's arms fall as if embracing Joseph; the way the cloth frames the heads of Christ and Joseph as an intimate twosome. But the presence of the Virgin seems to make this intimacy possible.



Figure 7. Deposition. Early fourteenth century. Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Barlow 22, f. 13v. Reproduced by permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

Further scenes in the *Mirror* underscore the mediated nature of compassion as expressed by Joseph and Nicodemus. After Christ is buried in the tomb, the two men do not, like the Virgin and her company of women,

begin lamenting the death of Christ anew; rather, they see the Virgin's distress and are moved to pity for her. They express their feelings in terms of anxious solicitude for her comfort, as each of them invites her to his house to rest.

JOHN AS FEMINIZED MAN

But in the midst of this polarized, gendered drama of feeling, there is a potentially destabilizing figure: John the Evangelist. Accompanying the Virgin and her entourage of women every step of the way, John beholds and weeps as freely as they do: he laments without restraint when Christ is dragged forward so pitilessly on the road to Calvary, when the nails are driven into Christ's flesh, and when the body is taken down from the cross and laid in the mother's lap. And the *Mirror* is certainly not unique in giving John this prominent position as compassionate male. In the standard crucifix of the period, the sorrowful Virgin beholds Christ's bleeding body from the right, and John, with equal sorrow, from the left. In narrative Passion iconography, too, John often responds to various scenes with as much grief and compassion as the women he accompanies. Although the scholarship on the figure of John is rich, it has not dealt centrally with the question of how he functions as exemplar of compassion.⁵⁹ What accounts for John's difference from other men, the emotional license given him, the freedom to feel? Clearly, John functions in part as a model of the monk or cleric throughout the medieval period, and this non-lay status goes a long way toward explaining his affective liberty. But in late medieval England and in the *Mirror* and its analogues, he also appears to function more broadly as an image of a mixed or third gender: as a model of the feminized man.⁶⁰

John's physical appearance provides the most important clues to the cultural meanings of his identity and its affective implications. In late medieval scenes from the life and Passion of Christ, he is always depicted without a beard; moreover, the artists call attention to his hair, portraying him with curly locks, often long and blond. These physical features have been interpreted in the scholarship as signs of John's youthfulness. There is sound reason for this: John is often called the youngest of the disciples in medieval texts, the beard is associated with full manhood, and long or curly hair is often the mark of youths. In addition, certain versions of the late medieval sculptural type known as the "Christus-Johannes Gruppe" clearly cast John as youth through his diminutive size relative to Christ.⁶¹ But there is another way of interpreting these physical features too: as indications of John's status as feminized man. Lending support to this interpretation of who or what John represents is the textual and visual evidence we have just observed: John's consistent placement amidst the women in scenes of the Passion.⁶²

John's youth and feminized features are complementary ways of

rendering a single late medieval belief: masculine identity, when it is predicated on the exclusion of the feminine, is an obstacle to feeling. By this I do not mean that having a male body was understood as a condition precluding compassionate response. The fact that John is male belies this notion. What John's youthfulness and feminized status seem to reveal is a medieval understanding of gender performance, one that sees gender as a practice. Youth, as it was constructed in the late medieval period, was a state of considerable malleability, when fundamental aspects of identity were not yet fixed but were considered to be in process. Among other things, this "unfinished" state permitted a relatively large degree of performative freedom, for gender categories were not firmly and finally demarcated until full maturity—and even then in varied ways depending on social class and profession.⁶³ As a *juventus*, John has the freedom to perform the feminine, to align himself with women and their emotionalism without forfeiting the option of acting in the masculine mode.

Not limited by the category of mature lay masculinity, John functions as a liminal figure in the *Mirror*.⁶⁴ The ease with which he feels and weeps with the company of woman implies that his heart can be as soft and impressionable—as capable of "melting," as the *Mirror* and many other Passion meditations so often put it—as the idealized heart of a woman. Yet he is also capable of adopting the firm, unyielding heart of a man. When Longinus spears the side of the dead Christ in a gesture of gratuitous cruelty, John, who has been kneeling and lamenting beside the Virgin, imploring the men to do no harm, instantly rises and switches into a masculine mode: he "toke to him mannus herte, & risyng ageynus hem, seide, Yhe wikkede menne, whi do ye this cruelte?" (180). Having chosen to perform masculinity, John chastises and challenges the soldiers until they go their way. In doing so, he is providing the Virgin with the masculine protection that Christ implicitly requested in committing his mother to him at the foot of the cross. John can thus act the part of a woman when compassion is warranted, the part of a man when strength is what circumstances require.

John's movements and narrative position in the *Mirror* underscore his function as a liminal figure. He moves with ease between masculine and feminine spaces and places. The first time he appears in the Passion narrative, for instance, he is in transition: having just witnessed Christ's arrest, trial, and condemnation—all events taking place in the public realm of men—he quickly journeys to "oure lady & Maudleyn & other of hir felawes, that were that tyme gederet in maudleyn house, where he hade made the sopere before, & tolde hem alle that was befallle of oure lorde & hese disciples, & then was there vnspekable sorowe, cryng & wepyng" (166). Equally at home in feminized, domestic space and in the public domain, John's liminal status finds an objective correlative in the image of the doorway—a key symbol of liminality.⁶⁵ He is frequently pictured at the threshold: when the company of grieving women returns to Magdalene's

house, he stands at the doorway, thanks the women of the city for accompanying the Virgin, and locks the door, thus enclosing himself in this domestic space with the women—both as their feminine comourner and as their manly protector (187). The next day he is the doorkeeper. When a knock is heard, it is John who goes to answer: “Jone [yede] to the dore & vndirstandyng that it was Peture, tolde hem so, & oure lady bade vndo the dore & let him inne” (189). Moreover, we often see John in a liminal role as a narrator; he mediates between the worlds of men and women by providing crucial narrative links throughout the Passion sequence. As a privileged eyewitness—one who sees more events than anyone else precisely because he can perform both masculine and feminine roles—he is constantly relating episodes to those who were not there. Having been in the company of men at Christ’s trial, he fills the women in; having been in the company of women at the foot of the cross, he tells Joseph and Nichodemus the sad news. Later he tells the women the details of an event from which they were excluded—the Last Supper—and describes to Peter the events from which he and the other disciples fled—“alle the processe of his passionne” (190).



Figure 8. Lamentation. Giotto di Bondone, ca. 1305–7. Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy. Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY.

What John registers in the midst of the masculine and feminine binaries in Love's *Mirror* is the freedom obtained by crossing boundaries between the masculine and the feminine, by choosing to perform both genders, or a third gender. His liminality paradoxically gives him centrality in the drama of the Passion (see [Figure 8](#)), and along with this centrality comes a certain power.⁶⁶ In affective terms, this power includes the license to feel in the feminine mode, to weep like a woman over the suffering Christ. He thus serves a crucial function in the *Mirror* as a figure with whom to identify: to read the *Mirror* with fullness of feeling not only includes the possibility of acting the part of a woman but also performing the role of feminized man. The implications of this choice will be discussed later, when we return to the ways in which the roles offered in the *Mirror* may have been activated by fifteenth-century readers. Here, it is important simply to recognize John's complex status as a man of feeling, which is to say, in this particular economy of affect, a man who feels like a woman.

SCRIPTS IN PERFORMANCE

If one of the recurring features of affective meditations is their tendency to script compassion as a species of gender performance, what can this configuration of affect tell us about how these scripts were "actualized" by a mixed readership of men and women in late medieval England?⁶⁷

Speculation is, of course, inevitable here; like other forms of historical performance studies, any investigation into how readers activated these scripts can only be a species of "virtual" history.⁶⁸ Moreover, abundant work in reception theory, performance studies, and the history of reading has rightly insisted on the unpredictability and variability of reading practices, including practices of resisting reading.⁶⁹ Yet the strong link in this genre between reading with feeling and reading like a woman cannot have been without historical force. Jonathan Culler's simple question, then, is worth resurrecting here: "If the experience of literature depends on the qualities of a reading self, one can ask what difference it would make to the experience of literature and thus to the meaning of literature if the self were, for example, female rather than male. If the meaning of a work is the experience of a reader, what difference does it make if the reader is a woman?"⁷⁰ Culler is certainly not positing an essentialist foundation for gender-differentiated reading practices; nor am I in what I will sketch, in conclusion, as a set of hypothetical reconstructions of how affective meditations may have been actualized and the cultural work they performed in late medieval England. As with any complex literary kind, I will suggest that this genre held potential for historical actualization that was both conservative and potentially radical and that it was so precisely because the affectivity it embedded was gendered.

From one point of view there is an obvious matrix into which affective

meditations fit: the context of the religious polemics of the period. And given the emergence of the Lollard threat in the late fourteenth century, the drastic censorship of vernacular religious texts via Archbishop Arundel's Lambeth Constitutions (1407–9), and the explicit ecclesiastical endorsement of Nicholas Love's *Mirror* in the fifteenth century as a substitute for Lollard texts and the gospels themselves, there is good reason to believe that affective meditations served a decidedly conservative function, precisely by stirring up feeling.⁷¹ In a formulation often taken as axiomatic in the scholarship on religion in late medieval England, to feel was not to think. Given a climate in which heresy was afoot and the authority and power of the established church were so sharply contested, ecclesiastical authorities had much to gain by promoting affective meditation among the laity at all levels. Fostering the practice of loving, compassionate dwelling on the sufferings of Christ could serve to deflect, divert, and contain the serious challenges that might arise if critical thinking about religious matters were allowed to flourish. Fostering feeling could help the church keep things simple. The fact that Nicholas Love so emphatically repeats the very word *simple* in the opening paragraphs of the *Mirror*, addressing the work to “hem that bene of symple vndirstondyng” and to “symple soules,” is surely among the features that prompted the canny Arundel to give this text his blessing.⁷² It is no wonder that much recent scholarship on religious writing in England has tended to adopt the term *simple* as a fundamentally accurate descriptor of affective meditations and the cultural work this genre performed.⁷³

The assessment of Nicholas Watson and others who have identified the genre (and especially the *Mirror*) as an instrument of conservative power gain even greater credibility when the mechanisms of feeling like a woman are exposed. On one level, this gendering reinforces structures of subordination. For female readers, it scripts a tautology: to feel is to be a woman, to be a woman is to feel. And since significant cultural capital accrued to women who acted like women in late medieval England, the practice of affective meditation can be recognized as a primary mechanism for the sedimentation of gender, in Butler's terms.⁷⁴ For male readers, the genre scripts a divide within the self, generating a gap between the masculine social self and the feminine feeling self, while simultaneously imbuing that feeling self with a naturalized value and legitimacy through its alignment with the traditional gendering of the soul as *anima*. This is not to say that the practice of performing feminized feeling could not generate dissonance, and thus resistance, for male readers (indeed, I take up this possibility at length, as it relates specifically to the lyric, in [Chapter 6](#)). But as we have seen, a number of features were embedded within the *Mirror* to facilitate the performance of feminine feeling by men: if the full adoption of the role of woman—in *imitatio Ceciliae* or *imitatio Mariae*—generated interference, the more distanced, vicarious, or triangulated modes of feeling represented by Joseph of Arimathea and Nichodemus provided another

point of access. The figure of John the Evangelist represents yet another idealized model for the embodiment of feminine feeling in a masculine self and one that can certainly be interpreted in its original context as an especially convenient model for ecclesiastical authorities in England to promote. Given the desire of the laity to imitate the clergy during this period, John's figural status as cleric could serve to define *imitatio clerici*—particularly for educated laymen who might be tempted to think like clerics—as an affective practice.⁷⁵ Youthful, feminized, seeking no temporal power, and engaging in no interpretive acts, he simply feels.

For these structural reasons, the feminization of affective meditation can indeed be seen as a powerful, if not deliberately calculated, strategy for containing the radical energies circulating in and around ecclesiastical politics. And it would seem to follow that an analysis of the gendering of affective practice could only bring us around to the model of “rounds” themselves, as articulated by Watson in his brief but trenchant analysis of the *Mirror* and especially of the paradigmatic image of Cecilia, who “lives her days in a repetitive round of devout meditation” and whose “meditation brings her devout sweetness in unvarying round”—an enterprise that certainly does seem to be “wholly unintellectual,” to substitute “affective intensity” for more serious “rational and social” concerns, and thus to lead predictably to yet more circularity, to the “round of ‘traditional’ devotion, so unconcerned with hard religious questions or the desire for theological knowledge.”⁷⁶

Watson is certainly right, in large measure. But we would be missing out on a significant aspect of how an emotional regime worked in late medieval England if we were to conclude that affective meditations were fundamentally “simple”—or more broadly, if we were to rest content with seeing theological innovation or ecclesiastical politics as the only contexts in which the cultural functions of this genre might be assessed or recognized.⁷⁷ Noticing the genre's additional functions requires asking some very basic questions. Is feeling really so innocent, so unproductive, so distinct from the rational? Do “rounds” always lead nowhere or always back to tradition?

Not always: I propose that the iterative practice of feeling like a woman can—and did—open out onto the new. For if “woman” is a structurally subordinate and marginal position, it is for that very reason always potentially a site of experimentation and innovation for men and women alike.⁷⁸ Moreover, repeated affective practices can indeed have significant cognitive effects. As recent research has shown, the dichotomy between thought and feeling is illusory: emotion and reason are intricately intertwined and mutually informing, even at the deep levels of the structure of the brain.⁷⁹

In the following chapter, I will suggest that the performance of compassion, through reading Rollean affective meditations and the *Mirror* as well as other iterations of the genre, did indeed produce something new in

late medieval England: a widespread “upheaval of thought,” to use Martha Nussbaum’s vivid phrase, relating not so much to vernacular theology as to what I will call a vernacular ethics. Precisely because it required the repeated, insistently carnal imaginative practice of beholding another’s pain, feeling like a woman provided an experimental standpoint, a new place from which the claims of the body could be given voice.

Marian Lament and the Rise of a Vernacular Ethics

COMPASSION IS NOT ONLY an emotion but also potentially the foundation for an ethic. The cultivation of compassion in the devotional realm, then, clearly had the potential to effect ethical thinking and behavior on a wider scale, and the rare autobiographical writings that survive from late medieval England reveal that in some cases meditation on the Passion did indeed produce this effect. Julian of Norwich describes how her visions of the suffering Christ—visions in part generated by the practice of affective meditation and feminized “beholding”—deepened her pity for her fellow Christians: “Right as I was before in the passion of Crist fulfilled with paine and compassion, like in this I was in party fulfilled with compassion of alle my evencristen.”¹ Margery Kempe, too, recognizes Christ in the sick and infirm: the sight of a leper with bleeding wounds causes her to weep “as yf sche had sen owr Lord Ihesu Crist wyth hys wowndys bledying,” and when her aged husband becomes helpless and incontinent, she “seruyd hym & helpyd hym, as hir thowt, as sche wolde a don Crist hym-self.”²

Though this habit of transferring compassion for Christ to ordinary Christians is more difficult to trace on a larger scale, it is clear that such transference was widely encouraged.³ J. A. W. Bennett has called attention to the relation between compassion for Christ and the Corporal Works of Mercy, which “kept alive the truth that the suffering Christ was to be found in the least of his brethren, the poor, the imprisoned, the halt, and the lame.”⁴ Grounded in the scriptural verse, “as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me” (Mt. 25:40), the Corporal Works are often explicitly described as a natural outgrowth of affective meditation. An entire chapter of the *Prickyngge of Love*, for instance, concerns precisely this connection. After a series of meditations on Christ’s sufferings, the seventh chapter sets out to show how in “byholdyng of this worthi passioun a man mai lere hou he shal stire hym-self for to do the werkis of merci & pitee to his euen-cristen.”⁵

The cultivation of pity for Christ may also have been a contributing factor in the foundation and support of charitable institutions during this period. As Miri Rubin observes in her study of charity in medieval Cambridge, it is “indisputable” that “charity was a central preoccupation for medieval men and women” during the later Middle Ages.⁶ The reasons for

charitable giving are always complex, and Rubin points out that the rich may well have been motivated by the desire to confirm their own status and power in society, to gain indulgences, to store up treasure in heaven, and the like.⁷ But her observation that the identification of the poor with the suffering Christ was a “recurrent theme connected with the exhortation towards almsgiving” suggests that compassionate feelings were also a significant motivating factor.⁸

But if we seek to understand the wider cultural significance of the education in feeling provided by affective meditation, it is perhaps the problem of violence in late medieval England that lays greatest claim to our attention. For at its most basic level, this meditative tradition exposes the horrific consequences of violence: Christ’s body is a body in pain, and the violent actions that caused this pain are not masked or euphemized, as they tend to be in early medieval renderings of the Passion, but are lamented and condemned. If the experience of meditating on Christ’s pain did indeed generate feelings of compassion, it would seem that this emotional pressure might have given rise to protest—to an ethical outcry not only against those forms of violence that were generally deplored and criminalized but also against those forms that were generally accepted as necessary: corporal punishment, torture, public execution, war.

Thomas Bestul cautions against the ready acceptance of this kind of logic in his study of the cultural functions of medieval Latin Passion narratives.⁹ Focusing on the subject of judicial torture, which came into widespread use during the very centuries when the genre of affective meditation was evolving, Bestul advances a subtle and counterintuitive argument. Though the texts seek to elicit pity, he writes, the graphic portrayal of the horrors inflicted on Christ may well have desensitized audiences to violence, just as violent films are often said to anaesthetize modern audiences:

As in the case of our modern age, there is no easy way to demonstrate the social impact of represented violence in the Middle Ages. If we look at societies where the image of a spectacularly tortured Christ was or is especially popular—Flanders in the fifteenth century, Poland in the sixteenth century, many Latin countries today—it is hard to demonstrate that those societies have made an especially easy accommodation to violence, nor would it be possible, on the other hand, to show that devotion to the suffering Christ has had an ameliorating effect on social behavior or the use of violence in society.¹⁰

But while rightly insisting that “our view of this must remain inconclusive” where the Middle Ages are concerned, Bestul leans toward an assertion that the Passion narratives did in fact have “hidden alliances” with torture, enabling and facilitating its use.¹¹ He argues that portrayals of Christ’s Passion may have served to legitimate “the violence of unspeakable acts by

developing an imaginative register about the pain and torture that came to be taken for granted as a natural and inevitable part of reality.”¹² Moreover, Bestul calls attention to the mentality embedded in the rhetorical figure *quam magis*, “how much the more”: if Christ, the innocent Lamb, could be tortured so, then how much more deserving of torture are those deemed guilty—the criminal, the heretic, the infidel, the enemy. Paradoxically, a heightened awareness of the trauma caused by violence could lead to increased cruelty rather than pity: for the guilty, the more pain the better.

By calling attention to these potential responses, Bestul demonstrates that increased pity for victims of violence was not an inevitable outcome of the cultivation of compassion for the suffering Christ. At the same time, Bestul’s insistence on the tentative nature of his own conclusions leaves the door open to further exploration of the relation between devotional texts and attitudes toward violence. In this chapter, I will advance another possibility. Setting the texts in the context of war rather than torture, I will suggest that the practice of affective meditations did indeed give rise to a significant current of protest against the ethical system that accepted violence as a legitimate means to an end.¹³

VOICES OF DISSENT

Recent work by historians on the major conflicts of the period, the Hundred Years’ War (1337–1453) and the Wars of the Roses (1455–85), has uncovered significant strains of overt opposition to warfare in late medieval England. This is not to say that the dominant opinion—at least as it is recorded by the dominant powers in surviving sources—was under serious threat; as John Barnie has observed, the chronicles of the period manifestly assert “that war, governed by chivalry, was a positive, ennobling experience.”¹⁴ When interpreting the writings of Froissart, for instance, Barnie warns against what has elsewhere been called presentism: “Honour is at the centre of the chivalric code of the aristocracy and military élite and it frequently involved violence. Such violence was often of an extreme kind which may seem revolting or quixotic to the modern mind and certainly ‘unchivalric.’ The fact that medieval knights did not regard violence in this way suggests that we are dealing with a fundamental cultural difference between medieval man and his modern western descendant.”¹⁵ Yet as Ben Lowe has argued, “minority voices” nonetheless deserve to be heard, and hearing them does not necessarily imply the projection of modern sensibilities. “To minimize or ignore the contributions of any ‘minority voice,’” he writes, “imposes artificial restrictions on what we can learn from the past by assuming any impact to be negligible from the outset.”¹⁶ Lowe’s own work, in which he traces a pacifist discourse through many genres, including vernacular literary texts by Gower, Langland, and Chaucer as well as anonymous writings (*Winner and Wastour*, *Dives and Pauper*, and sermons) extends the

earlier work of C. T. Allmand on voices of opposition among the clergy. Wyclif, for instance, “appeals to the spirit of Christ’s teaching to show that war is wrong, and that men must settle their differences by toleration and understanding.”¹⁷ Likewise, Wyclif’s orthodox contemporary, the English Dominican friar John Bromyard, “although more temperate in his opinions, plainly disapproved of both the manner and the spirit in which his fellow men went off to fight one another.”¹⁸

Neither Lowe nor Allmand consider the possibility that the cultivation of compassion through devotional practices had anything to do with this strain of opposition to war (and, in the case of Wycliffite opposition, the basis for dissent was clearly not affective piety). But certain texts strongly suggest that affective devotional modes did foster the current of protest that they detect. In a letter written by Philippe de Mezières to King Richard II in 1395, for example, Philippe urges Richard not to renew hostilities with France in terms that clearly echo late medieval writings on the Passion: “How great is that cruelty, since by shedding the blood of our fellow creatures, English and French alike, once more we have killed sweet Jesus Christ, Who died for us and suffered harsh death for our sins. And yet we, both English and French, see Jesus, Whom we have killed, every day in the bitter waters of His Holy Passion, according to the saints, and look on Him, also, in the mirror of Holy Writ. We see Him, Who has the face of man, and like unto us in body, very God and very man, Who came to us in the desert of this world, for us and for our salvation, and we know Him not as we should.”¹⁹ Philippe continues in this vein at length, urging the necessity of “showing a new pity for the death of our gentle Redeemer, Jesus Christ, and heart-felt horror at the effusion of Christian blood.”²⁰ Pity for Christ thus becomes the foundation of an ethics of nonviolence toward other Christians. The same affective and moral principles undergird Thomas Hoccleve’s opposition to war in his *Regement of Princes* (ca. 1412). Addressing Henry V, Hoccleve laments the “pitous harme” and loss of life caused by the war with France, asserts that it is not justice but the “gredy hert” and the desire to “wynne worldly tresour and richness” that has motivated the English, and calls upon those in power to make peace, taking pity on their own people as a sign of pity for Christ:

O noble cristen Princes honourable,
ffor him that for yow suffred passioun,
Of cristen blod, haueth compassioun!²¹

Overt voices of opposition to war, then, do exist in the historical record, and some of these voices draw on the language and logic of affective devotion.

In arguing that there was a significant current of protest against violence in late medieval England, however, my aim is not to adduce further texts of the kind represented by Philippe’s letter or Hoccleve’s appeal. It is another kind of text that interests me here: the Middle English laments of the Virgin. Protest against violence is, I suggest, embedded in devotional writing itself,

particularly in this important subgenre. In its various forms—from short lyric appeals to lengthy prose laments—the Virgin’s voice seems to have functioned as a vehicle for the expression of moral and political dissent.²² Moreover, the nature of the protest uttered through the voice of the Virgin is even more radical than the overt expressions of opposition we have just examined. It is not only the infliction of violence that the Virgin decries in protesting the death of her son; it is also the willingness to submit to violence—to yield one’s life in the service of a cause deemed worthy—that she condemns. In place of the ideal of heroic self-sacrifice, the Virgin articulates an alternative ethic, one that has as its highest ideal the preservation of human life and refuses to accept the tenet that the greater good can be won only through the destruction of human flesh.

This ethic is articulated piecemeal and unsystematically in its various iterations, as we must expect, I think, in any investigation of a vernacular ethic. “Prosopopoeia B. Virginis”: this rubric, accompanying a Middle English lament in a late fifteenth-century manuscript, underscores the availability of the figure of the Virgin at this moment in history as a role, as a voice—a performance position that could serve as a resource for affective and cognitive experimentation by a wide array of authors and readers in a variety of contexts.²³ And while there is significant variety among the laments, what is striking—and what I will initially highlight here—are the many points of similarity that taken together reveal a widespread “upheaval of thought” in late medieval England.²⁴

Since the laments have not been considered in this light, it is important to demonstrate that this particular generic type invites, indeed virtually requires, interpretation within a context beyond the purely devotional. For even the most astute critics of Middle English religious literature have had difficulty fitting the laments neatly within a devotional framework. Critics have continually pointed to a disturbing element of “excess” in the late Middle English laments—an element related to the evolution of the Virgin’s voice itself. Before turning to an examination of specific laments, then, it is worth taking a closer look at the history of the Virgin’s vocality and its problematic status in the criticism.

THE VIRGIN AND THE VOICE OF PROTEST

The rhetorical amplification of the Virgin’s voice is one of the most striking changes in the development of the Middle English *planctus*.²⁵ In the early Latin tradition, the mother’s grief is most often narrated in the third person and characterized by the solemn dignity expressed in the *Stabat mater* and related hymns.²⁶ Early Middle English lyrics, many of them translated from the Latin, generally portray the Virgin’s sufferings with a similar restraint and distance. The celebrated “Nou goth sonne vnder wod” is typical of the early poems in its narrative stance and in its depiction of a mother who

grieves in silence:

Nou goth sonne vnder wod—
me reweth, marie, thi faire Rode.
Nou goth sonne vnder tre,—
me reweth, marie, thi sone and the.²⁷

But in certain lyrics and verse narratives of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, prosopopoeia becomes a key compositional device: the Virgin begins to speak for herself with greater frequency, either in dialogues with her son on the cross or in response to an interlocutor seeking to understand and thus share in her deep pain. The late thirteenth-century “Stond wel, moder, ounder rode” illustrates this new strain. The lyric is structured antiphonally, Christ’s words alternating with those of the Virgin. To the dying Christ’s exhortations to cease weeping and accept the necessity of his death, she responds by asserting the impossibility of complying with such requests:

“Stond wel, moder, ounder rode,
Bihold thi child with glade mode,
Moder blithe might thou be.”

“Sone, hou may ich blithe stonde?
Ich se thine fet and thine honde
I-nayled to the harde tre.”²⁸

While there is finally a tacit acceptance of Christ’s death in some versions of “Stond wel,” fourteenth-century laments more often present a Virgin who insists on expressing her grief and refuses to be consoled. By the early fifteenth century, laments of the Virgin in lyric, prose, and dramatic form have become one of the most abundant, elaborate, and intensely emotional kinds of Passion literature.²⁹

Yet it is precisely the amplification and stridency of the Virgin’s voice that has made the laments both puzzling and distasteful to modern critics. To date, Rosemary Woolf has advanced the most thorough discussion of the late Middle English *planctus* as a genre. Focusing on lyric forms in particular, Woolf decries the “excessive emotionalism” and “immoderate grief” in the late laments; in them she sees a “whipping up of emotion for its own sake rather than as an understanding response to Christ’s work in the Redemption.”³⁰ In contrast to early Middle English laments, in which Mary exhibits “virgin modesty and outward composure” and an acceptance of the necessity of Christ’s death, the later lyrics are objectionable on doctrinal grounds (245). They lack “a substantial theological frame of reference” (272) and thus fail in their ostensible purpose, that of leading the meditator toward a more deeply-felt recognition of the love manifested by Christ

through his sufferings and death on the cross. At the conclusion of her vigorous denunciation of the *planctus* for their “monotonous excess” (265) “indiscriminate copiousness of lamentation” (265), and lack of “both devotional and literary decorum” (245), Woolf seems to reproach the Virgin herself for the apparent senselessness of her outpourings: “Restraint in grief is more moving than hysteria” (273). Though subsequent studies have not condemned the laments so roundly, they do describe the lack of doctrinal framework and copious expression of emotion as a problem. Douglas Gray writes that “it cannot be denied that in many of the *planctus* there is an extreme emotionalism which easily becomes monotonous.”³¹ C. W. Marx observes that the “dominant impression” left by late medieval laments “is one of emotionalism and melodrama unaffected by larger purposes.”³²

George Keiser is another who concedes that the late laments are “overburdened with weeping, wailing, and despair.”³³ In his view, however, the *planctus* are not poetically or doctrinally flawed; they only appear so because we have not taken account of the prevailing aesthetic of the period or situated them in their proper context. Keiser suggests that what modern critics perceive as “excess” was understood by medieval writers and readers as necessary and fitting rhetorical adornment. Poetic tastes change just as fashions do, he asserts:

Their authors subscribed to a rhetorical poetic, believing that poetry is “the art of clothing the already discovered truth in fitting language” for the purpose of moving the audience to an acceptance of that truth. If the rhetorical *copia* seems excessive at times in the *planctus*, it is necessary to keep that belief in mind and to recognize as well that in an age of sumptuary excess, the idea of clothing the words of the Virgin in the best rhetorical finery must have seemed wholly appropriate and decorous to the authors of the *planctus*. The audience for whom they wrote was, owing to the increased literacy among the middle and upper classes and to the pious devotionism widespread among these classes, large and enthusiastic, as well as given to sumptuary excess.³⁴

As for the other charge leveled against the laments—that they fail to achieve their devotional and didactic aims by neglecting to provide a sturdy theological framework for the Virgin’s grief—Keiser argues that medieval readers would have supplied the necessary superstructure themselves: the Easter Liturgy was familiar to all, and whether or not individual laments conclude with a reference to the Resurrection, faith in that event frames all *planctus Mariae*. Thus, even though the Virgin’s grief seems unrelenting, the “concluding vision is one of joy.”³⁵

Keiser’s explanation is plausible. It is certainly true that much medieval writing, particularly the medieval lyric, is not self-contained but depends on externally supplied knowledge and contextualization for its significance. But

to claim that the Virgin's voice is answered and contained by the doctrines standing behind or beneath the laments tranquilizes the intensity of the Virgin's complaints without accounting for why such fervency and copiousness are there in the first place, and analogies with contemporary sumptuary excess seem a weak explanation.

A more useful analogy, I suggest, is woman's lament itself as cross-cultural genre and anthropological event. Whether voiced in anticipation of a loved one's death or after the fact, publicly improvised by women or composed by male authors, woman's lament frequently surpasses its primary purpose as an outpouring of grief and becomes a vehicle for protest, including especially protest against war. The array of cultural contexts in which this has been demonstrated is remarkable, ranging from ancient Athens and medieval Persia to eighteenth-century Ireland and twentieth-century India, New Guinea, Finland, Greece, and Argentina.³⁶ This cross-cultural similarity does not mean that woman's lament serves always and everywhere to register protest against violence: woman's lament has shifting cultural applications that make it a historical phenomenon as well as a cross-cultural one. And as the more overt forms of pacifist writing during this period in England suggest, the historical context was certainly conducive to releasing the oppositional force latent in the genre.

In addition to this generic alignment, there is a formal feature of the Middle English laments that strengthens the possibility that they register dissent: many of them are structured as debates or dialogues in which the Virgin argues with one or more adversaries, including Christ himself and the personified Cross. They thus participate in a tradition of late medieval dialectic that had by this time become notable for its open-endedness, for its searching out and rigorous testing of competing visions of reality.³⁷ Although not all the laments are structured this way, the fact that many of them are suggests that at least some of them were consciously conceived of as a way of voicing a serious ethical position.

THE MAKING OF A VERNACULAR ETHIC

If the Virgin's laments do articulate a dissenting vernacular ethic, what is its foundation? Significantly, it is not what the weight of tradition might lead us to expect: Christ's innocence—so often the chief source of sorrow in early medieval Passion literature—is not the basis for protest here.³⁸ To be sure, the Virgin often recalls, in the course of her lamentation, the fact that her son has been unjustly condemned. In one lyric, for instance, she chastises an instrument of the Passion, the scourge, which has “bete my sonne that neuer did synne”;³⁹ in a prose lament, her sorrow is intensified by her knowledge that her son is a “lotheles lambe”—deprived of justice by Pilate, falsely accused by the Jews, and “as a comun thef put be-twene to theuys.”⁴⁰ But in none of the laments is her protest framed fundamentally in terms of the guilt

or innocence of the victim. The Bodley *Burial of Christ* brings this into relief quite clearly. It opens with a scene given over to Joseph of Arimathea, for whom the travesty of justice is the cause of grief:

O Pilate, Pilate, in thy palesse,
He that neuer did amysse
This day was dampnyt! O innocent bloode,
Most of vertue, most graciose and gude,
This day stremyt owt lik a floode.⁴¹

As soon as the Virgin enters the scene, the ground of protest shifts. It is no longer the spilling of “innocent blood”; it is the spilling of a child’s blood: “What erthly mother may refreyn, / To se hir son thus cruelly sleyn?”⁴² The rest of her lengthy lament is an elaboration of this theme.

In the Bodley *Burial* and elsewhere, it is clear that a particular, late medieval model of maternal compassion itself is the foundation for protest.⁴³ Whether the Virgin is railing against those who condemn, torture, and kill her son (Pilate, the Jews, and the crucifiers) or arguing with those who maintain that her son’s death is necessary for the greater good (Christ himself, the Father, and the Cross), she insists on the recognition of the simple truth that she is Christ’s mother, that he is her son. That relationship and its attendant obligations are reason enough for arresting the violent actions of the torturers, for calling off the divine plan that casts her son’s death as a necessity. Again and again, the Virgin adduces her early experience of mothering Christ—as if this is important and relevant evidence:

I lappyd the, I lullyd the, I layde the soft,
I kyssed the oft opon my knee;
And now thou makest me syng ful oft
To se the thus hang on thys tre,
Allas! wyll hit no better be?⁴⁴

Full oftyn me lust hym hals and kysse
Swete was the bret betwyx vs wente.⁴⁵

The modir to se hir sone so blede,
It kittith myn herte as with a knyf.
My sone that y was woont to fede,
To lulle, to lappe, with songis rijf.⁴⁶

The emergence of the “lullaby” lament in the late fourteenth century, whose pathos derives from forebodings of the Passion even while the child lies in his cradle, and the development of the *pietà*, whose power to move lies in the superimposition of the maternal past on present grief, offer further

testimony that a concept of maternal compassion has become the foundation of protest.⁴⁷

The Virgin's fixation on pregnancy, nursing, and caring for the infant Christ has certainly not been missed by other critics. But the significance of her appeal to maternal experience has been underestimated. Keiser, for instance, subsumes these ubiquitous images of maternity into the general scheme of "antithetical style."⁴⁸ For him, rhetorical contrast is the key issue. As a means of heightening pathos, medieval handbooks of rhetoric prescribed contrasts between present adversity and past prosperity; thus, Keiser concludes that the laments "inevitably focused on the antithetical contrast between the Virgin's present sorrows and her joys at the Nativity and in the Childhood of Jesus."⁴⁹

But there is more at issue in this contrast than the intensification of sorrow through comparison with past joy. For on closer inspection, the Virgin's experience of nurturing her child is not always used as an illustration of past happiness. It is true that many of her recollections are idealized and suffused with nostalgia. In one lyric, she speaks longingly of "thi suete bodi that in me rest, / that loueli mouth that i haue kist";⁵⁰ in another, she addresses all mothers, alluding to her own pleasure in playing with her child just as they now play with theirs: "Your childur ye dawnse vpon your kne / With laghyng, kyssyng and mery chere."⁵¹ But the affective component of her memories is intimately linked to—indeed, is cast as deriving from—maternal practices: "I lullyd hym, y lapped him, y wolde him fede";⁵² "the to sowke, of my brestis yaf I";⁵³ "I left the not."⁵⁴ In such phrases, maternal care is the relevant issue. In telling the Jews, Judas, and even the carpenter who made the Cross that "the child is dede that soke my brest,"⁵⁵ the Virgin is doing more than remembering early intimacy with her infant: by defining the victim as a product of maternal nurturing, she is defining the act of killing as a violent undoing of maternal labor. And in telling Christ "I weryd the wyll fro all kyn harme" or "Dere son, thow sokyd vppon my breste,"⁵⁶ she is not simply indulging in nostalgic recollection; she is reminding her son of pertinent facts that reveal his obligation to her:

o, thinke how many a throwe

Thu on myn armes lay, and on my knee

Thu sat, & had many a cusse of me;

Also, the to sowke, of my brestis yaf I,

The norissching right faire & tenderly.⁵⁷

Such instances of maternal care are advanced in the hope that they will persuade him that his decision to submit to violent death is wrong:

Thynke how thou lay vppon myn arme

And soke my brest whil thou were yonge

I left the not thou doste me harme,

The Virgin thus presents maternal nurturance as the foundation for an ameliorative, protective form of compassion—an emotion that contains within it a set of ethical claims: that she has a duty to preserve her son’s life, that the crucifiers have a duty to refrain from killing him, that he has a duty to live.

THE COST OF THE FLESH

There are significant differences in the details of how this argument is worked out in various laments, as we might expect with such a substantial corpus. But at base, most of them share a similar logic, one that turns on an understanding of value that their construction of maternal compassion affords. As Ronald de Sousa has argued, “emotions are among the mechanisms that control the crucial factor of *salience* among what would otherwise be an unmanageable plethora of objects of attention, interpretations, and strategies of interference and conduct.”⁵⁹ Similarly, Martha Nussbaum defines emotions as “intelligent responses to the perception of value.”⁶⁰ In the laments, the locus of value is the body of the one who has been nurtured. What the Virgin knows, in short, is the cost of the flesh.⁶¹

That maternal compassion is both less and more than romanticized sentiment becomes clear when the rhetoric of investment in the laments is recognized. The Virgin protests the destruction of her child’s body as waste—or indeed as theft. “Off my richnesse ye haue me robbyd,” the Virgin cries out to those who have killed her son.⁶² In another lament, she states this principle of investment quite succinctly: “my welth al halely in him was”;⁶³ in another, he is her “tresure.”⁶⁴ Indeed, in the prose “Lamentacion of Oure Lady,” she accuses the Father of wrongdoing in terms that make him out to be a crooked merchant, one who persuaded her to invest in a scheme with promise of great riches—a scheme that is now revealed as fraudulent, for her riches have been stolen: “A, holy fader, where be thi trewe behestis? why woldist thou ordeyn me to be a moder and make me ryche with a chylde, & now am bereuyd of my childe and am lefte alone most vnworthiest of alle wymmen?”⁶⁵ A profound sense of waste—of the pointlessness of investing in the well-being of a child, only to see that child destroyed—infuses the Virgin’s language: “A, vnblissid moder and sorful moder, why woldist thou coueit a childe and bere a child and noriche a child, and thus sodeynly and wikkedly art bereued of thy childe?”⁶⁶ The same idea is expressed in the long poem Hoccleve translated as the “Lamentacioun of the Grene Tree for the Losing of hire Appill,” a text whose central conceit is the notion that the tree on which Christ hangs has claimed him as its fruit, while the Virgin insists that he is her fruit—the fruit of her womb and her nurture. In the course of

blaming the elements for conspiring with the Cross in the death of her son, she turns to address the Earth. Quake for sorrow, she commands; cleave in two; “And alle that blood, restore thu me to / Which thou hast drunken: it is myn, & not thin.”⁶⁷ Equally strident is her accusation of theft at the poem’s conclusion, as she addresses the Cross thus:

O Aduersari, thow cruel drye tree,
To the speke I! Nowe hast thou thi entent;
My sweete fruyt thou hast be-reved me
Ageyn my will, nothing of myne assent.⁶⁸

The final sentence in this lament is an angry demand that her investment be restored to her: “Yelde me my fruyt in goodly wise!”⁶⁹

In addition to this rhetoric of investment and theft, the laments insist that identity itself is relational. One obvious indication of this conception of identity, so obvious that it can easily be overlooked, is the use of epithets. The Virgin refers to Christ not as “Christ” but simply as her son: he is “my derworthi child ... my derling,” “the chyld ... that soke my brest,” “my barn.”⁷⁰ Such affirmations of relation extend to the Virgin’s repeated self-identification as mother. One prose lament, for example, begins with the Virgin’s introduction, “When I, mary, ihesu moder, sat in Jerusalem.”⁷¹ The epithet “ihesu moder” is then reiterated, to an almost absurd degree, throughout her narrative: “And whan I, mary, ihesus moder, sitting myself alone”; “and thanne I, mary, moder of ihesu, sayde to hir”; “And thanne I, mary, ihesus moder”; and so on.⁷² Such redundancy is clearly not necessary for the practical purpose of letting her listeners know who she is; rather, the repetition of this epithet reinforces the notion that her identity is intimately bound up with that of her son. Often this interconnectedness between mother and child is presented in very physical terms. In many of the laments, the Virgin refers to Christ as “my fode,” the Middle English word for “nursling.” The term almost certainly derives from the word for *food*—an etymological link that implies that the Virgin is defining her son as an extension of her own body, the product of her blood and milk, flesh of her flesh.⁷³ This physical bond implies that his body is not free for the taking. It does not belong to those who condemn and crucify him; it is not his own to give, nor does it belong to the Father. His body was formed from hers, and because of this she has the duty and the right to preserve it. And indeed the power of the Virgin’s claim about relational identity and its ethical consequences is recognized by Christ. In order to justify his course of action, he must first shift the terms of identity. Commending his mother to the care of John, he calls her not “mother,” but “woman.” The scene has its foundation in scripture (John 19:26), but in several laments it is cast by the Virgin into additional evidence that reveals the error of her son’s ways: “It semith that thu makist departyng / Of the & me, for ay without endyng,” she protests; “And, namely, sith thu me but ‘woman’ callest, / As I to the were straunge &

al vnknowe.”⁷⁴

In dialogues between the Virgin and her son, an assumption about the superiority of the Father’s ethical system clearly lies behind Christ’s attempts to shift the terms of identity, as well as his more general efforts to persuade his mother to see the virtue in his death. Christ speaks as if his death is a necessary rite of passage, one that marks his full commitment to the “higher” law of the Father. It must be as my Father commanded, he asserts:

Tharfor, moder, thi murnig mend,
and for me murn thou now nomare!
vnto mi fader bihoues me wend.⁷⁵

Christ repeatedly attempts to convince his mother that obedience to the Father is progress: “Moder, rest now of thi wepyng & of thi crying: for this is my fadres wille; and alsoo, moder, lat it be thi wille.”⁷⁶ But the Virgin refuses to see obedience to the Father’s will as moral development. She typically holds fast to the validity of the maternal standpoint in the face of “superior” male authority, insisting that maternal care be the standard that measures the moral character of any decision or action. Thus, the term *unmoderly* becomes a synonym for *cruelly* or *wrongly*: “They buffete hym unmoderly / Which was my barne and all my blysse.”⁷⁷ Much of this aspect of the Virgin’s argument is directed toward the Cross—symbol of the Father’s ethical system and literal instrument of his will. In several laments she calls it a “nest”—an irony that underscores its appalling affront to maternal values: “Nou is on rode mad thi nest.”⁷⁸ Indeed, in the lament known as the “Disputation Between Mary and the Cross,” this insistence that the debate be conducted in terms of maternal care extends to her description of the Cross as wicked stepmother (“Tre vnkynde, thou schalt be kud; / Mi sone step-Moder, I the calle”⁷⁹), one whose wickedness is defined as a violation of maternal nurturance and the love that seeks to preserve:

Mi fruit was born with beestes on bed,
And be my flesch my flour gan falle.
With my brestes, my brid I fed;
Cros! thou yeuest him Eysel and Galle.
Mi white Rose Red is spred,
That fostred was in a fodderes stalle.
ffet and fayre hondes
That nou ben croised, I custe hem ofte;
I lulled hem, I leid hem softe.
Cros! thou holdest hem highe on lofte,
Bounden in bledyng bondes. (614)

Far from subscribing to the belief that the Father’s system is built on

superior knowledge and logic, the Virgin calls it trickery, sleight: “Cros! to slen, hit is thi sleiht” (614). Indeed, in the “Disputation” the Virgin is so insistent on what she perceives as the wrongness of Christ’s death that the poem would be highly blasphemous were it not for the displacement of agency and the resulting deflection of blame from the Father to the Cross. “Cros, thou dost no trouthe,” the Virgin asserts; “Mi fayre fruit thou hast bi-gyled” (612). When the Cross attempts to cast the crucifixion as triumph by interpreting Christ’s literal palms as the palms of victory—“Ladi ... thi brihte palmes nou I bere” (615)—the Virgin refuses to accept this allegorical sleight of hand. And when the Cross uses a form of abstract reasoning to cast Christ’s death in terms of production, creation, and gain, she refuses to be swayed, for the witness of the senses says that this is destruction: “Roode! thou reendest my Rose al red” (620).

In the laments, maternal compassion is infused with intimate love, which is the final ground of protest: “O special love,” the Virgin mourns, “which that me ioyned hast / Vnto my sone, ful strong is thi knettyng!”⁸⁰ Love in the laments is presented as both cause and consequence of the work of mothering (care as an emotion leads to and follows from care as action), and it is the refusal to recognize the moral claims inherent in maternal love that the Virgin decries. She uses the affective argument against those who would kill her son; the fact that he is “mi loue” ought to prevent such cruelty.⁸¹ Indeed, her tactic in several laments is to claim that the bond of love she shares with her son deserves such respect that if the crucifiers are not willing to release him, they ought to kill her too: “Als loue me bindet to my sone, /so lat vs deyyen bothen i-same.”⁸² More often, however, the Virgin uses this affective logic against Christ himself. In her view, Christ not only has a duty to live because she gave him life and fostered him; he is obliged to live because of the love they share, for the violation of affective bonds is, as she puts it, a “wrongful disseueraunce.”⁸³

Christ’s decision to die, of course, is also motivated by love. But the kind of love he seeks to express through his death is qualitatively different. It is a generalized, transcendent, “selfless” love—the type of love that medieval philosophy held to be supreme precisely because it requires the suppression of particular, fleshly affections.⁸⁴ Like many representations of the valiant soldier taking leave of his loved ones, the laments often depict Christ attempting to persuade his mother to envision herself as part of the larger community—“mankynd”—for whom he offers his life. His death is an act of protective love for her, he argues, for she is among those who will be saved from damnation through his sacrifice: “Yif y ne deye thu gost to helle; / hi thole this ded for thine sake.”⁸⁵ Christ thus seeks to move her understanding of love to a “higher” level. But on this point, too, she typically remains firm, asserting the primacy of particular affections and their attendant obligations. That her son’s love for all mankind should not outweigh his feelings for her is the premise underlying her persistent pleas for pity—pity that ought to

take the form of his descent from the cross: “Süete sone, reu on me, & brest out of thi bondis.”⁸⁶

The laments, then, seem to protest even the most “valiant” form of violence—that of self-sacrifice in the service of a worthy cause—as a destructive ruse. Through such sacrifice, not only is love’s labor lost, but love itself in its immanent and particularized aspect—which, as the Virgin expresses it, possesses stronger moral claims than the more abstract and generalized love of all mankind.

This is a bold, dissenting ethical position—one that has analogues elsewhere, but whose distinctive shape and strength in this particular iteration were forged in a particular crucible in history: in the production and use of an emotionally charged vernacular devotional genre.⁸⁷ But what did this “upheaval of thought” do historically? Where did it go in late medieval England?

Not far, it seems, at least if we take the measure of its cultural efficacy by investigating the history of warfare in England. War continued to be waged quite vigorously, with a concept of noble self-sacrifice continuing to assist in fueling it.⁸⁸ The reasons for this are both too obvious and too complex to explore here, but in conclusion I will highlight some limiting structural features embedded within the laments themselves.

MECHANISMS OF CONTAINMENT

Even as the laments give voice to protest, they often undermine and limit their own potential for historical efficacy. Occasionally they do so through narrative action itself. The “Disputation Between Mary and the Cross,” for instance—one of the most strident articulations of maternal thinking in the genre—ends with a striking gesture of submission. When the Tree usurps the Virgin’s maternal terms, arguing that it must “bear” her son so that mankind may be “borne” to new life, the Virgin finally surrenders, retreating into silence and even going so far as to kiss the Cross:

The queen a-cordet with the cros,
And ayeyn him spak no more speche.
The queen yaf the Cros a cos.⁸⁹

Containment also occurs at the level of narrative action in those laments that conclude with the Virgin’s enforced enclosure in domestic space. As we have seen, the Virgin’s lamentation is most often publicly enacted; she grieves on the road to Calvary, as she stands at the foot of the cross or as she sits beneath the cross holding her dead son in her lap. Publicly proclaimed, her protest has the potential to move others, as she herself recognizes: “& alle that saugh me in the wey were temptyd to wepe ffor the sorow & lamentacioun that I made.”⁹⁰ When she is forced to relinquish her son and

leave the public arena by those who care for her (“intill a chamber thai gert me go”⁹¹), her argument, too, is domesticated: the narrative action itself sends a strong message that such protest must be banished from the public sphere.

It is not so much narrative action that contains the oppositional force of the laments, however, as a more complex dimension of their historical existence: the ways in which they tend to invite different responses and levels of performative use from male and female readers, impressing upon women their special and natural obligation to adopt the Virgin’s ethical stance while implying that men, even with the best imaginative efforts, can never fully understand this position. The argument voiced by the Virgin—one that male authors clearly helped construct—is thus reassigned to women, whose political powerlessness as a social group ensured that the element of protest would be contained.

In some cases, this separation of readers according to gender is very obvious. The fifteenth-century lyric aptly titled by its modern editor “An Appeal to All Mothers,” for instance, clearly acknowledges that it will be read by both men and women, for in the middle of the poem the Virgin invites both to participate in her sorrow: “Wepe with me, both man and wyfe.”⁹² Yet, from the first stanza through the last, it calls out to mothers with a special pointedness as privileged readers. It begins thus:

Off alle women that euer were borne
That berys childur, abyde and se
How my son liggus me beforne
Vpon my kne, takyn fro tre.
Your childur ye dawnse vpon your kne
With laghyng, kyssyng and mery chere;
Be-holde my childe, be-holde now me,
ffor now liggus ded my dere son, dere.⁹³

As this stanza implies, the affective power of the lament as a whole derives from the new dimension it adds to the traditional contrast between the Virgin’s healthy child and the dead son in her lap: here, medieval English children stand in for the infant Christ. Instead of focusing exclusively on her own child’s lovely limbs and gestures, the Virgin extends her rhetorical reach into the medieval present, into ordinary homes, calling on ordinary mothers to recognize the discrepancy between their living children and the Virgin’s dead son. Moreover, the Virgin dwells here on the excessive fussing of mothers over their offspring—fussing which reveals the enjoyment mothers take in mothering. The simple act of putting on a child’s cap, for instance, becomes an elaborate process of choosing the right chaplet, grooming the child’s hair, pinning the cap on, beholding the result—of savoring the act from start to reluctant finish: “thu wost not wele when thu hast done.”⁹⁴ The purpose of such detailed descriptions is to convince

mothers of their special affective obligations. Because their daily experience is, as this poem portrays it, one of loving “beholding,” they are particularly “beholden” to share the Virgin’s sorrow:

Thu hase thi son full holl and sounde,
And myn is ded vpon my kne ...
Me think ye be holdyne to wepe with me,
ffor now liggus ded my dere son, dere.⁹⁵

What the lyric as a whole seeks to do then is to draw all mothers into a circle of shared grief for the loss of the Virgin’s child—a “sisterhood in pain” that places men on the margins, excluded from this image of maternal solidarity by virtue of experiences they are presumed to lack.⁹⁶ Sacrificial death is thus reinscribed as something women in particular need to protest and mourn, and the locus for this grieving is resolutely presented as private, domestic space—as the rooms in ordinary medieval homes where children are cared for, played with, beheld.

Male readers had the option of imagining themselves as the women whom the Virgin addresses in “An Appeal to All Mothers,” of entering into the maternal role for the duration of the reading process. Imagining maternal experience could thus produce in men the full identification with the Virgin that the poem demands from its female readers. But many laments place a limit on such roleplaying by men through their insistence that there is in the end a fundamental “natural” divide between men and women: since men are by nature hardhearted and rational rather than emotional, this logic goes, they cannot ever fully understand a woman’s love and grief for her child. The exclusionary force of this notion can be seen in a number of laments that construct a male reader whose inability to share the Virgin’s feelings is the major source of tension in the poem. In one, the Virgin accosts an unfeeling “man of reason” thus:

Thou synfull man of resoun that walkest here vp & downe ...
Loke one my sorofull chere & haue ther-of pytee,
Be-wailynge my woo & payne, & lerne to wepe wyth me.⁹⁷

The Virgin’s attempts to educate the male reader in pity, however, are presumed to be ineffective. In the last stanza, his heart is as hard as it was at the outset: “Thyne herte so indurat is that thu cane not wepe / ffor my sonnes deth ne for my lamentacyoun.”⁹⁸ Even in those laments where the Virgin’s pleas to “come learn to weep from me” are assumed to produce tears in the implied male reader, the softening of his heart is cast as dramatic “conversion,” as when the Virgin tells one “harde hartid” man “thou must be converted.”⁹⁹ The threat latent in such a radical transformation of identity can perhaps be discerned through the resistance of the implied male readers in many of the poems. Full allegiance to the maternal mode of feeling by the

male reader, while certainly possible by individual male readers who used these poems in their devotions, is never actually dramatized in the laments. While the Virgin's invitation to enter the circle of grief is assumed to be accepted without strain by female readers, the same invitation—"come dwell wyth me"¹⁰⁰—is never fully accepted by the male readers figured within the poems.

Indeed, there is a distinct subcategory of laments in which distance is deliberately constructed between the Virgin and the implied male reader. This group of poems is marked by its use of a narrative frame deriving from the secular *chanson d'aventure* tradition.¹⁰¹ In the *chanson d'aventure*, we may recall, a male narrator describes a chance encounter. While he is out riding or walking alone, or sometimes entering the world of dreams, he happens upon a maid in distress, who laments her fate; he then reports what he heard to an assembled group, usually defined as an audience of men. The openings of several of the *planctus* are clearly adapted from this tradition:

Als i lay vp-on a nith
Alone in my longging,
Me thouthe i sau a wonder sith,
A maiden child rokking.¹⁰²

As I walked me this endurs day
to the grene wode for to play ...
As I walkyd vndir the grene wode bowe
I sawe a maide fayre I-now.¹⁰³

This endres nyght A-bout mydnyght
As I me lay for to sclepe,
I hard a may syng lullay
for powaret sor sco wepe. (4)

As Reson Rywlyde my Rechyles mynde,
by wayes & wyldernes as y hadde wente ...
I met a mayde at the citeys ende,
snobbynge & syghynge sche wes ny schente. (8–9)

Framed in this way, such laments generate a division in their readership: male readers are offered a masculine figure with whom to identify—the male narrator who observes the Virgin from a distance—while female readers are encouraged to identify with the grieving woman herself, just as they are in the secular *chanson d'aventure*.

By positioning the male reader as spectator, the *chanson d'aventure* frame encourages him to adopt an attitude of condescension. Instead of imagining himself in the maternal role, he is asked to observe that role as an outsider, pitying the Virgin and the plight she, but not he, is fated to assume

by virtue of her sex. In most of the lyrics of this type, his position is analogous to that of Nichodemus and Joseph of Arimathea in the texts and images we examined in the previous chapter: that of the sympathetic male bystander whose patronizing stance takes the form of a desire to protect, comfort, and even admire the Virgin in her grief. In one popular lament, for instance, the male narrator encounters the Virgin on the outskirts of Jerusalem. From his perspective, her maternal sorrow is at once pitiable and beautiful: she is all the “fayrer” for attempting to disfigure herself through the traditional gestures of womanly grief—tearing at her hair and face and breast (9). After she finishes voicing her grief and protest, she asks not for his participation in her sorrows or his conversion to her way of thinking but for his respect for her maternal prerogative, his sympathetic ear as she performs her maternal part:

Yf eny man love me len me a plase
that y may wepe my fylle and reste,
and euer more to crye “alasse, alasse!” (13)

While the form of male condescension figured in this poem is sympathetic, it contains the force of the Virgin’s argument simply by reinscribing direct, unmediated compassion as a mode of thought and feeling proper to women.

Occasionally, however, male condescension takes on a more disdainful form, and its force in containing the Virgin’s argument is correspondingly stronger. An element of scorn is particularly noticeable in the lament beginning with the narrator’s jovial invitation,

Listyns, lordyngus, to my tale
And ye shall here of on story,
Is bettur then outhur wyne or ale
That euer was made in this cuntry. (18)

This narrative frame sets up the *planctus* as entertainment performed for the pleasure of a group of men—“lordyngus.” Situated in the same category as “story” and “wyne or ale,” the power of the Virgin’s argument is not only trivialized but also cast as diversion from the serious business of life. At the same time, the discrepancy between the jovial company of men inscribed in the poem’s frame and the suffering woman at its center makes the male position seem the more attractive and superior one. In such a context the Virgin comes to seem less pitiable than pitiful, in the modern sense of that term. Moreover, learning to feel and think like the Virgin is not the issue. This imagined community of men is not one seeking to be educated, nor is it aware of any need to reform; the ameliorative, protective form of compassion the Virgin articulates is cast as an emotional practice to be embodied by women alone.

Ultimately, however, such formal features as the *chanson d’aventure*

opening are less significant as containment mechanisms than the very fact that this vernacular ethic is constructed as maternal—and even more fundamentally, that it has its basis in a feeling so insistently gendered as feminine. Historically speaking, the compassionate maternal image in late medieval England was good to feel with, good to think with—and ultimately powerless to effect real political change.



Kyndenesse and Resistance in the Middle English Passion Lyric

LATE IN THE HISTORY of the Middle English Passion lyric, an intriguing figure enters the scene: dancing Besse. She does so in a carol with the refrain,

Come over the burne Besse
 Thou lytyll, praty Besse,
 Com over the burne, Besse,
 Thou lytell praty Besse
 Com over the burne, Besse, to me.¹

Although “Come over the burne” circulated mostly as a secular song and was printed as such, two allegorized versions survive. The shorter of these appears in the Ritson manuscript (British Library Additional MS 5665), where it is scored for three male voices. The single stanza recorded here lays out the allegorical strategy quite neatly:

The burne ys this world blynde
 And Besse ys mankynd;
 So propyr I can none fynd
 as she.
 She daunces and lepys
 And Crist stondes and clepys:
 Cum over the burne, Besse, to me!²

As unlikely as this scenario might seem, were it only to depict Christ attempting to court a merry, self-delighting, lower-class English wench of drinking-resistance song tradition, its incongruities are amplified in the longer version of the carol, which appears in what appears to be a layman’s commonplace book compiled in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (Cambridge, Trinity College MS O.2.53).³ There, it becomes clear that the Christ who calls is a suffering, bleeding, dying Christ. As he relates, in eleven stanzas, all the standard tribulations—the accusations of the Jews, the betrayal by his disciples, the crowning with thorns, the mocking and scourging, the sobbing and swooning of his mother—he speaks as if hanging from the cross, suffering in an eternal present:

On crosse myne arme spread is
My body forbled ys
Wt gall my mauth fed ys
Come se
Renewed are my paynes
And voyde are my veynes
Come over [the burne, Besse].⁴

Throughout, Christ's attempts at amorous persuasion are founded on that distinctly medieval affective logic of romanticized reciprocal suffering, of compassion for Passion: if only the beloved can see how much he bleeds, how much he has suffered and continues to suffer for her, she will stop moving in the jolly, carefree way she now moves—and be moved instead to cross that burne to join the suitor who has sacrificed so much for her.

Christ's hopes are founded in turn on a naturalized concept of compassion encoded in the word *kyndenesse*, whose ranges of meanings and resonances we will explore. He reproaches Besse for being *unkynde* in her failure to respond with the grateful, eros-inflected form of compassion that he has come to expect. But the sheer, unvarying repetition of the refrain implies that she will have none of it. She persists in performing an alternative version of *kyndenesse*—instinctive, amoral, oblivious to the construction of natural affections that claims she owes him her compassionate love—and it is her version of the natural that wins out at the lyric's end. There is no forward movement in the plot, no change of heart, no gestures Besse makes that might model a turn toward Christ in the reader. Even the verb tense—always present—scripts a kind of eternal parallel play in which Christ's pleas for pity will continue to resound alongside Besse's continual dancing and leaping. Moreover, the information furnished in the concluding stanza—"the water hit fallyth / And crist stondyth & callyth"—not only gestures toward the perpetual inefficacy of Christ's calling (Besse will be Besse, just as inevitably and innocently as water falls); it also opens up the sly suggestion that this is a *noisy* burne, more akin to a waterfall than a meandering stream, and that this feature of the drama has prevented Besse from hearing a thing.⁵

How can this apparent send-up of the time-honored topos of Christ the suffering lover be explained? There is, of course, an interpretive framework that could be—and has been—brought into service here, tranquilizing what might strike modern sensibilities as comic disruptions and recuperating Besse for the cause of turning hearts toward compassionate love for their Savior. That framework is the well-attested practice of colonizing the secular lyric for sacred purposes, thus generating serious and elevating forms of parody.⁶ But it would be such a shame to normalize Besse by assimilating her, without close scrutiny, to this tradition. Doing so would not only deprive us of the pleasure of discovering a flicker of intelligent, irreverent

humor in a period of literary production that is still trying to shake its reputation for “dullness”; more important, it would prevent us from investigating what Besse and her kind might reveal about strains of resistance to the affective tradition in late medieval England.⁷

For Besse is not alone. She is merely a particularly fleshy example of an array of recalcitrant beloveds who begin to populate the Middle English Passion lyric in the last quarter of the fourteenth century. These figures who resist Christ’s pleas for an eroticized compassion register an important and hitherto unnoticed strain of *disaffection* embedded within the affective tradition. When this recalcitrance has been remarked upon in the criticism, it has been aligned with the penitential strand of late medieval religion—and indeed it does form part of this strand.⁸ But the lyrics are more complex than this. As figures for the soul, mankind, or the feeling self, Besse and her avatars appear not only to accommodate but even to facilitate resistance to feeling compassion as this emotion had come to be constructed through centuries of inscription in lyrics on the Passion: as a dyadic, deeply intimate emotion ineluctably tinged with the erotic.

In this chapter, I seek to isolate and examine this current of resistance to compassion, to advance an explanation for it, and to explore some of its historical implications. I will suggest that the late Passion lyrics register forms of category crisis or anxious masculinity—mixed feelings that can be traced chiefly to orthodox lay men, caught as they were between increasing cultural pressures to perform straightened forms of masculinity in the world while rendering feminized feelings to the suffering Christ in their private devotions. This argument is linked in turn to a broad observation about genre, one I offer here as a way of opening up and extending the valuable work on the religious lyric by Rosemary Woolf and Douglas Gray (whose studies published in the 1970s—before the advent of feminist and gender studies—remain standard in the field): that is, that the fifteenth century witnesses what might be called a masculinization of the Middle English Passion lyric, akin to the masculinization of romance that occurs during the same period. Like the romance, the late Passion lyric as a genre changes around the turn of the fifteenth century in ways that appear to reflect the needs, desires, and anxieties of lay men of the middling and upper ranks—a newly prominent textual community that can also be identified as an “emotional community” in the sense described by Barbara Rosenwein.⁹

That such men make up a more substantial proportion of the audience for vernacular devotional reading of all kinds during this period is well attested. The implications for the lyric, however, have not been explored. In part, this is because the lyric itself has been considered of little value to literary scholarship that seeks to historicize. Not only are the lyric’s tropes so enduringly conventional (a feature that has made them seem ahistorical); so many basic facts that might serve to anchor lyrics in history—who wrote them, who used them, in what contexts—are also extremely difficult to

recover, requiring much patient examination of manuscripts. Even then we are usually left with mere possibilities rather than certainties.

The argument that follows is indeed based in part on manuscript research, but here I will propose that such research can and must be supplemented by a new way of thinking about the lyric. Like forms of anonymous popular culture in other eras, the vernacular religious lyric may well be an especially useful genre for recovering history, including the history of emotion. A number of factors suggest that this genre is, in a word, symptomatic: the brevity of the lyric, its fluent circulation between written and oral cultures, and its lowly status in the hierarchy of medieval genres make it the most plastic of forms—and thus more likely than other literary kinds to absorb the inflections of its users. Above all, the fundamental anonymity of the genre—the fact that it is, in Woolf’s astute formulation, “naturally” rather than “accidentally” anonymous—exposes its propensity to invite experimentation and adaptation as its authors seek to design verbal contraptions that work for those who use them.¹⁰ Given these features, the model of generic change advanced by Hans Robert Jauss (“every turn in the history of genres—must have a correspondence in the sociohistorical situation”) is particularly apt for the lyric.¹¹ Because this is the most marginal of forms—surviving for the most part in the margins of manuscripts, on flyleaves, or embedded within more substantial texts—we are likely to see in it what works for readers in a local affective economy and to perceive, in the canary-like vulnerability of the form, symptoms of cultural anxiety or distress.

What might we gain by tracing these troubled forms of feeling in the Passion lyric, or in attempting to grasp the trajectory of the genre and its relation to gender? Perhaps a richer understanding of the “vulnerabilities” in late medieval English Catholicism, vulnerabilities that enabled its demise, even among the most “traditional” of good Catholic men.¹²

CHRIST’S MIDDLE ENGLISH BELOVEDS

The element of resistance in the late lyrics can only be recognized fully as a puzzling historical problem when it is set in the context of a larger story. As a mechanism for eliciting feeling, the figure of Christ’s spouse changes over time in ways that are quite striking. Thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Passion lyrics present the role of the beloved as an enabling device: imagining the self as the spouse for whom Christ would die is assumed to facilitate the compassionate melting of the heart and intimate bonding with *suete Iesu* that is affective devotion’s professed goal. But in lyrics of the late fourteenth through the early sixteenth century, this is no longer the innocent image it once was. It gets troubled. In this later period, the role offered the reader is more often that of Christ’s *unkynde* beloved—one who ignores, disdains, or violently rejects his appeals for an eroticized pity.

Further trends accompany this shift from the compliant to the resisting object of Christ's desire: an increasing obsession with the term *unkyndenesse* itself and, more complexly, the invention of an array of specific performance positions. These positions seem to allow users of the later lyrics to enter the intimate drama of the Passion in more protected or vicarious ways—and to avoid, especially, the power of the first-person performative utterance.

The thirteenth-century lyric, “Hi sike, al wan hi singe,” for example, is typical of the early period in its assumption that the reader will enter into the role of Christ's beloved without hesitation. With the immediacy and directness of the first-person singular, this text anticipates an ease of use, scripting love sighs and romantic longings as if the reader will not hesitate to claim the suffering Christ as lover:

Hi sike, al wan hi singe,
for sorue that hi se
wan hic wit wepyng
bi-holde a-pon the tre.
hi se ihesu, mi suete,
his herte blode for-lete
for the luue of me.¹³

First-person scripts such as this—clear instances of “emotives,” to use William Reddy's term—continue to be produced up to the last quarter of the fourteenth century, and they are equally marked by simplicity and a presumed ease of use.¹⁴ The first-person lyrics of Richard Rolle, “My trewest tresowr” and “Ihesu swet,” are exemplary instances of this type. The former exploits the sensory power of alliterative verse and driving rhythm to stir up passionate compassion for Jesus the lover.¹⁵ In the latter, too, Jesus is “my leman,” and his death on the cross is an act of romantic love that the speaker yearns to reciprocate:

Ihesu, of loue I se tokenyng,
Thi armes spred to loue clippyng,
Thi hede bowed to set kyssyng,
Thi side al open to loue showyng.

Ihesu, euer when I thinke on the
And lok vpon thi rode tre,
Thi swet ymage bloody I se:
Lord, do that sith to wound me.¹⁶

Structurally, too, “Ihesu swet” conjoins passion and compassion elegantly and effortlessly: stanzas describing events of the Passion are intertwined with stanzas expressing the speaker's love-longing.

Even when the voice in the early lyrics is that of a preacher, the image of

Christ as suffering lover is advanced as one that will have an automatic affective efficacy. This lyric recorded in an early fourteenth-century manuscript, for instance, rests on the assumption that if only the reader can agree to play the role of Christ's beloved, compassionate feeling will follow:

Man, folwe seintt Bernardes trace
And loke in ihesu cistes face,
How hee lut [lowers] hys heued to the
Swetlike for to kessen the,
And sprat hise armes on the tre,
Senful man, to klippen [embrace] the.
In sygne of loue ys open his syde;
Hiis feet y-nayled wid the tabyde.
Al his bodi is don on rode,
Senful man, for thyne goode.¹⁷

The fact that the reader is simultaneously addressed as “man” and enjoined to imagine the embraces of Christ reveals an important feature of these early lyrics: they do not worry about whether Christ's beloved is a man or a woman (the “man” of the opening address can be “mankind”), nor do they insist that the feeling self is the feminine *anima*. They present a flexible attitude toward gender and the forging of intimate bonds: like Bernard, men who read or hear this poem are not only permitted but encouraged to imagine themselves in an intimate erotic dyad with the suffering Christ—without a strong sense of threat or cost. At the same time, however, the lyric subtly foreshadows later developments by anticipating or scripting some measure of hesitation in the reader or listener. It does so in part through the mediation of the preacher's voice and in part through the nature of what is asked: to “loke” at the face and body of the suffering Jesus, as if gazing on the divine lover—and feeling through that gaze a receptivity to being desired—does not come naturally or easily but needs to be encouraged or licensed.

If any serious anxiety is evident in the early lyrics, it is the fear of not being able to feel the kind of compassionate love that a good *lemman* ought to feel. The utility and desirability of entering the role itself remains unquestioned:

Quanne hic se on rode
ihesu mi lemman,
An be-siden him stonden
marie an Iohan,
And his rig i-suongen
and his side i-stungen,
for the luue of man,
Wel ou hic to wepen
and sinnes for-leten,

yif hic of luue kan,
yif hic of luue kan,
yif hic of luue kan.¹⁸

The repetition in the final lines of this lyric function as a kind of periperformative incantation, suggesting that iterative performance can bolster at least the will to learn to feel as compassionate beloved, even if this form of pitying love does not come easily.¹⁹ The Harley lyric “When y se blosmes springe” registers a similar gap between the speaker’s current affective state and the compassionate feelings Christ’s beloved ought to offer him. Here, the speaker who sighs for “Iesu, milde ant softe” is caught in a bind. This speaker longs for *Iesu* and experiences him as “blisse” (“my ioie ant eke my blisse / on him is al ylong”) but does not yet feel the piercing of the heart that ought to be felt at the sight of the crucifixion:

When y miselue stonde
ant with myn eyen seo
thurled fot ant honde
with grete nayles threo—
bloody wes ys heued,
on him nes nout bileued
that wes of peynes freo—
wel wel ohte myn herte
for his loue to smerte
ant sike ant sory beo.²⁰

Significantly, the stumbling block is a failure to enter fully into character. The speaker has not yet committed to playing out the relation to Christ as an intimate, romantic drama:

Alas, that y ne con
turne to him my thoht
ant cheosen him to lemmon.²¹

The logic shaping this script, then, predicates emotional performance on intimate role-playing: once the meditator has fully consented to playing the role of Christ’s beloved, compassionate feeling will follow. Entering that role is presented as a difficulty, one whose potential causes we will explore below. Still, the lyric scripts a will to persuade the self to overcome that difficulty. The final stanza begins with another loving address to Christ —“Iesu, milde ant suete”—thus leading its performer through an experience of wanting to feel like the compliant object of Christ’s love.²²

“Sweetness,” in fact, is the prevailing flavor of the early lyrics, operating in the suasive mode recently delineated by Mary Carruthers.²³ Sweetness is the operative form even when the poems seek to elicit guilt. In the dialogue

“Vndo thi dore, my spuse dere,” for instance, which opens with an allusion to the bride’s infidelity, Christ’s gentleness and forgiveness seek to pierce the beloved’s heart through their sweetness. The initial inability of the bride to respond to the Passion with pity is followed, at least in the version recorded in Grimestone’s late-fourteenth-century commonplace book, by an act of acceptance:

Lord, for senne i sike sore,
Foryef & i ne wil no more,
With al my mith senne i forsake,
& opne myn herte the inne to take.²⁴

It is significant that these lines are uttered in the first-person singular and in the present tense.

Beginning in the late fourteenth century and continuing through the early sixteenth, however, what is scripted in the Passion lyrics is less an inability to perform the feelings appropriate to Christ’s beloved than an active resistance to doing so. Strikingly, first-person scripts all but disappear—and along with them the assumption that the intimate role of Christ’s *lemman* will be easy to perform. Indeed, the very word *lemman*—with its tender, innocent associations—drops out of use, and “sweetness” fades away as a suasive rubric. The voice in the lyrics is now most often that of Christ, insistently imagined as wronged and reproachful. The lover’s complaint becomes the dominant form, and in it Christ accuses the reader of “unkindness,” as in this appeal from the cross:

Vnkynde man, gif kepe til me
and loke what payne I suffer for the.
Synful man on the I cry,
alanly for thi lufe I dy....
Of al the payne that I suffer sare,
with-in my hert it greues me mare
The vnkyndenes that I fynd in the
that for thi lufe thus hynged on tre.
Alas! why lufes thou me noght,
and I thi lufe sa dere hase boght?²⁵

As this lyric illustrates, the form of the lover’s complaint is typically melded with the form of the reproach: the centuries-old *Improperia Christi* from the Good Friday liturgy are given new life in this period, the collective “O vos omnes” transmuted into the personal and vernacular in order to intensify feelings of individual affective obligation. Even as this potentially increases the affective pressure on the reader, however, the form itself provides a buffer between the reader and the immediate performance of emotional response; for while the lover’s complaint seeks to conscript the reader in an

intimate drama, response is left unscripted. The role does not demand a speaking part. Performative options are thus left open or safely off the record, in a more emphatic version of the periperformative than we have seen in conjunction with the early fourteenth-century lyrics. Listening is itself a lesser pressure—one that does not demand what now comes to seem a serious difficulty: yielding eroticized compassion because it is owed, because it has been “boght.”

As the arresting opening address to “unkynde man” and repetition of the term in this lyric suggest, *unkyndenness* becomes a concept to which the late lyrics obsessively return. There is a range in the style and severity of such *unkyndenness*. Usually, it is simple unresponsiveness, as in the lyric above or in this short verse:

O man unkynde,
Have thou yn mynde
My passyon smert,
Thou shall me fynde
To the full kynde—
Lo, here my hert!²⁶

But if such lyrics through their very lack of resolution register hesitation to comply with Christ’s demands for compassionate love, there are others that stage *unkyndenness* in bolder terms. Perhaps the best known of these is the latefifteenth-century “In the vaile of restles mynd.” This lyric famously takes the collective “folk” of the *Impropria* tradition and transmutes it into one violent virago. As Christ puts it, to a sympathetic male figure introduced in the poem’s *chanson d’aventure* frame,

My faire love, and my spouse bryght,
I saved hyr fro betyng, and she hath me bett;
I clothed hyr in grace and heavenly lyght,
This bloody surcote she hath on me sett....

I crownyd hyr with blysse, and she me with thorne,
I led hyr to chambre, and she me to dye;
I browght hyr to worship, and she me to skorne,
I dyd hyr reverence, and she me velanye.²⁷

And so on. Like dancing Besse, this figure for the beloved never does model for the reader of the poem a guilt-inflected, loving turn toward Christ and the intimate affective embrace he insists he has merited through his suffering. Indeed, she takes *unkyndenness* to such extremes that Christ wishes to call her by that name (“I may of unkyndnes the appele”²⁸). Although Christ says that he will patiently wait for her “jantilnesse,” no such softening is forthcoming. The disjointed, shadowy plot does indicate that

Christ succeeds in bringing her to a bridal chamber, but there are no indications that she consents to this union. At the poem's end, Christ is still begging her to look at him ("Yit myght thou, spouse, loke onys at me!") and to avoid fleeing ("go never me fro!").²⁹

The complexities of how "In the vaile" works, in terms of the identifications it invites and the mixed feelings it potentially elicits, are considerable, and I will return to examining some of them. Here, I simply wish to conclude this brief survey of Christ's beloveds by highlighting the late hour at which the resisting bride of "In the vaile" materializes. In the history of the Passion lyric, this performance position is a new affective technology: it is as difficult to locate parallels to this decidedly "dawngerouse" spouse in the early period as it is to find in the later period the untroubled, yearning voices of "Hi sike al wan hi singe" or "When y se blomes spring." There has been a sea change. How did this happen, and why?

LAY MEN AND LYRICS

The rebellious bride, as Mrs. Noah and the Wife of Bath make plain, is a figure who surfaces in other genres and serves multiple functions in late medieval culture. But to understand the functions she is serving here, I would like to continue for a moment with "In the vaile" and in particular, to take a look at the unassuming figure inhabiting the margins of that poem—the lay man wandering out, in good *chanson d'aventure* fashion, seeking his "treu luf." At the most basic level, what this figure does—simply by calling into the service the operations of the *chanson d'aventure*—is to cast his audience as lay men in a straight economy of desire ("you men desire women," the *chanson d'aventure* insists, thus circumscribing homosocial desire in a way that brackets off homoerotic feelings). As a personified form of rhetorical *ductus*, this man is the poem's point of access, the primary figure with whom the audience is asked to identify; he thus enables and indeed requires the poem's audience to enter the drama as men. What this figure then offers is a position of distance and accommodation: he provides a safe perch on the outskirts, so to speak, of the drama that unfolds—a performance position that allows readers to continue to identify with his manliness even as they are asked to imagine their souls as the feminine object of Christ's love. Crucially, the split self dramatized in this way offers a means of acting out rebellion against that feminized and eroticized role—of resisting the whole, deeply embedded topos of Christ the suffering lover—without placing men outside the bounds of orthodoxy by asking them to reject the affective tradition altogether. The male narrator continues to be cast as sympathetic listener, one who does feel a species of compassion for Christ. The predicate for this form of compassion, which ostensibly disavows the erotic, is gender similarity, structured through that familiar device, the

triangle; the narrator sympathizes with Christ as one man to another in the trials of heterosexual love.³⁰

Manifestly fictive, this figure nonetheless gestures toward history. Taken together with other forms of evidence, this implied reader registers the predicament of devout lay men seeking to use affective lyrics in their private meditations: he seeks devotional intimacy with Christ and wants to yield the compassionate love that tradition says he is obliged to yield in response to the love shown through the Passion; yet what he encounters is an inherited structure of affectivity that insists that the feeling self—"mannes sowle"—is feminine and that compassion for Christ is most fittingly felt in erotic terms.

Why this gendered structure of affectivity should cause anxiety when embedded in the lyric and not in such long meditative texts as Love's *Mirror* may have to do with the brevity of the lyric as form. The duration of the affective performance matters. Long prose meditations allow the reader to enter into and become absorbed by them in the manner of fiction; reading for an extended period allows the social or "worldly" self to be bracketed off, to fade from awareness. But the brevity of the lyric does not permit this setting-aside of the socially situated self. When a lyric is read, the self constructed by the text (Christ's beloved) is put into very close proximity temporally with the social self (the manly, bourgeois self, for instance, or the husband-father self, an identity that spatial poetics are likely to have reinforced: private devotions were often said in the privy chamber, locus of the marital bed, before the invention of the prayer closet in the early modern period).³¹ Lyric identity could thus threaten or destabilize social identity, and vice versa, in a way that the selves adopted in longer meditations might not.³²

That there is indeed a meaningful link between the male figure in "In the vaile" and the social identity of those who used it is strongly suggested, if not conclusively proved, by the manuscript evidence. "In the vaile" survives in just two fifteenth-century manuscripts: London, Lambeth Palace MS 853, and Cambridge University Library MS Hh.4.14. Both appear to be household miscellanies whose contents and physical features reflect the tastes and use of the urban bourgeoisie, and if a principle of selection can be determined in each, it is that of patriarchal authority and the fostering of those secular virtues that establish the respectability of the family and particularly the male head of household.³³ "In the vaile" has not been situated within the force field of the masculine bourgeois ethos so strongly present elsewhere in these manuscripts, but I would suggest that its configurations of gender and affect serve performatively to underwrite this ethos. The resistance to eroticized compassion in this lyric, along with the form of sympathetic feeling between men figured on the margins of the poem, is of a piece with the shoring up of straightness that these manuscripts seek to produce elsewhere.

One explanation for this correlation between gender and genre is simple:

when more lay men start to use the genre in their private devotions, the gendered structure of affect in the Passion lyric generates forms of anxious masculinity, and this anxiety then gets absorbed into the genre itself. On its own, however, this demographic explanation is not sufficient, for it leaves intact a highly questionable assumption: that anxiety would be the inevitable result when lay men are asked to repay, through eroticized feelings of compassion, the love Christ displayed in the Passion. In fact, such anxiety was by no means inevitable: it is a product of changing structures of feeling.

A brief look at a particularly interesting early manuscript can illustrate this point. Sometime near the end of the thirteenth century, an English layman copied a motley array of texts into his commonplace book, now known as Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Digby 86. As the editors of the facsimile observe, the manuscript contains “prayers and devotional texts, romances, fabliaux, humorous lyrics, a game and party tricks, medieval receipts for both humans and birds, prognostications and titbits of useful information (like the different procedures for ridding a house of malignant spirits and guests who have overstayed their welcome),” and the editors conclude that the original compiler appears to have gathered these items for his own use.³⁴ Among the devotional items are several lyrics in Anglo-Norman and Middle English. One of these, “Cuard est kē amer n’ose,” casts the relationship between Jesus and the reader in decidedly romantic terms. Its argument begins with a statement on the value of love: “He is faint-hearted who dares not love and base who does not wish to” (Cuard est kē amer n’ose, vilens est ke ne vuet amer).³⁵ Yet “folly it is to love something that cannot endure”; therefore, this argument for profitable affective alignment goes,

Who wishes to love without regret, I will show to him a true friend,
one who is so powerful that none can measure up.
He is a king, of noble birth, in beauty without a peer
and of unfailing goodness, a very courtly and gentle hearted lover.

I speak of the winsome Jesus: what could be more loving
than to rescue us from the devil’s clutches, redeeming us by his precious
blood?

If you but look on his handsome face, his fair, delightful countenance,
the world will not seem worth much beside the desire you feel for Him.³⁶

The Passion functions here as incitement to a specifically erotic love; it is proof that Christ is a “true friend / ... a very courtly and gentle hearted lover.” The voice in this lyric is that of the preacher as go-between, one who seeks to persuade the meditator that setting one’s heart on Jesus is not only prudent but also supremely advantageous. It has its own immediate, felt rewards: the simple act of looking at the image of Jesus on the cross (“if you

but look”) will instantly yield affective fruits that are reinforced by an awareness of the rightness of this feeling. Moreover, this love is superior: it will elevate the worth of one who chooses to practice it. Loving Jesus in this intimate, manifestly romantic way thus confers lasting social benefits. And in the manuscript, loving Jesus does not remain merely an injunction experienced as if from a preacher’s voice; nor does it remain a way of responding to the Passion enjoined upon a collectivity. The manuscript also includes a Middle English lyric scripted in the first-person singular—one that names Jesus repeatedly as the speaker’s lover:

Swete ihesu, king of blisse,
Min herte loue, min herte lisse,
Thou art swete mid I-wisse—
Wo is him that the shal misse.

Swete ihesu, min herte light,
Thou art dai with-houten night,
Thou geve me strengthe and eke might
For-to louien the al right.

Swete ihesu, mi soule bote,
In min herte thou sette a rote
Of thi loue that is so swote,
And wite hit that hit springe mote.³⁷

What the Digby manuscript appears to bear witness to is a form of desire: the desire of a lay man to cultivate an intimate, eroticized bond with “swete Jesu” in his private devotions. If the resistance to eroticized compassion in the later lyrics does indeed reflect the anxieties of lay men, then, it is clear that such troubled feelings were shaped by specific historical structures. Something seems to have happened between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries to generate this resistance. The question comes into even sharper relief when we consider the apparent similarities between the social identity and practical concerns of the Digby 86 compiler and the primary compiler or compilers of Trinity College MS O.2.53 (where the long version of “Come over the burne” is uniquely preserved). The contents of the manuscripts show considerable overlap: the compilers of each manuscript had a strong practical bent; both manuscripts exhibit strong interests in politics, history, trade, and worldly success.³⁸ Yet for the Digby 86 compiler, there is no evidence of conflict, no category crisis, no anxious masculinity, whereas in the Trinity manuscript, “Come over the burne” is just one of several devotional items that seem to register such crises, anxieties, and conflicts in imagining the relation between the self and the Christ who would suffer and die to win his love.³⁹ What needs explaining is why eroticized compassion for “sweet Jesu” would be possible and desirable for lay men in thirteenth-

century England—and what happened to restrict or disrupt this intimacy in the later period.

The important work of C. Stephen Jaeger can go a long way toward providing an explanatory context. What seems to enable the eroticization of compassion in the early lyrics is the affective structure Jaeger has described as “ennobling love”—a remote and historically contingent way of loving whose origins Jaeger locates in the eleventh century in the courts and monasteries of Europe and whose demise he situates in the sixteenth century.⁴⁰ Jaeger’s fundamental thesis is that this form of love makes copious use of the language of eros but is not necessarily expressive of libidinous feelings; the famous episode in which Rupert of Deutz imagines Christ coming down from an altar crucifix to embrace him, and kissing him deeply, is offered as just one of many examples of this language of eros used in the service of ennobling affective experience. Jaeger argues that ennobling love is aristocratic, that it first emerges between men and only secondarily between men and women, and that it has a very public life. Jaeger’s observation that this way of loving is socially elevating is especially important: to perform this kind of love was an act that could serve to confirm or establish one’s aristocratic social position.

What we see in the ease of the lyrics of Digby 86 then, as well as in the early Passion lyrics more generally, is the availability of this discourse of eroticized, elevating love between men where intimate feelings for Christ are concerned. A man such as the Digby compiler had in effect two licit affective options, linked in turn to two viable performance positions: he could love Christ as if with the feminine *anima*, accessing a form of emotional intensity that operates within a heterosexual matrix; or he could read this lyric as a man in the act of affective prayer and love the suffering Christ with ennobling love—a dyadic, intimate love between men that owes no apologies, that can be proclaimed confidently and openly.

Why is it then that ennobling love does not seem to enable the late Passion lyrics to operate in similar ways? Jaeger’s innovative work can be extended and refined under the pressure of this question. For although Jaeger states that the gender of the lovers does not matter in the early centuries and implies that it continues not to matter through the sixteenth, the evidence he presents suggests otherwise. The examples he cites as the centuries progress are increasingly instances of love between men and women; in fact, he cites no examples of ennobling love between men after the fourteenth century. It seems to me that this change in the data occurs because ennobling love, in its primary form as a licit eroticized affective structure operating between men, *dies* in the late fourteenth century, at least in England. And if we ask what caused the death of this structure of feeling, one answer seems clear: what killed it was *kyndenesse*.

The term *kyndenesse* gained an unprecedented degree of circulation and, crucially, an unprecedented positive valence across discursive domains in fourteenth-century England. As Andrew Galloway has observed, it is in this period that the term began to function as a “keyword” in the sense defined by Raymond Williams. “With its volatile mixture of secular and religious controversy and its trilingual intellectual culture still dominated by the clergy, yet increasingly accommodating a literate laity,” Galloway writes, “fourteenth-century England was rich in swiftly developing ‘keywords’ that preachers, chroniclers, noblemen, and poets used to think about and indeed to give structure to social and religious ties.”⁴¹ In the latter half of the century, especially, the two primary meanings of *kynde* (what is natural, or what is moral) become tightly intertwined—so much so that, as Galloway notes, “exploring the double-entendre of both the ‘natural’ and the ‘moral’ meanings of ‘kyndenesse’ must rank among the favorite verbal games of Middle English religious writers.”⁴²

Galloway’s rich and subtle analysis of this term captures the celebratory resonance of the concept as it is articulated in the sources. Carrying a strong sense of gratitude within it, *kyndenesse* comes across as the most promising of concepts, for it carried within it the potential to distribute social and political power more equitably by positing affinity rather than hierarchy as a primary social ideal. Celebrated in the sources, too, is the notion that this ideal for social and religious ties is, or ought to be, easy for anyone to learn. Ethical behavior requires no special schooling; this knowledge is innate and needs only to be recalled. Learning to be *kynde* is thus cast as a form of remembrance and specifically of remembering what it means to live in a family. Idealized kin relations surface again and again in the sources as the ground of the natural. In affective terms, to be *kynde* means to have “normal affections or dispositions,” and this meaning is readily and frequently conflated with that of being “well-disposed towards one’s kin.”⁴³ Performing idealized familial roles thus becomes a primary way of learning to be *kynde*. Getting into character—imagining the self as brother, mother, child, spouse—becomes a resource of first resort for learning how to *feel* as one should and thus to behave as one should. All one need do, in short, is act natural.

But there is a threatening aspect of *kyndenesse* that emphases on its promise have tended to occlude. *Kyndenesse* is relentlessly structured, shaped, and defined against its purported opposite, *unkyndenesse*. *Unkyndenesse*, too, functions as a keyword in England in the late fourteenth century and even moreso in the fifteenth; and this term has as one of its common meanings “unnatural” intimate relations between men.⁴⁴

It has long been recognized, of course, that *sexual* relations between men received increasingly harsh censure in the later Middle Ages. The impact of nature’s rise as a regulatory schema has received abundant attention from scholars of the history of sexuality ever since John Boswell’s groundbreaking work. As Boswell observes, the transformation of nature

into a moral principle exerted a powerful force in fostering prejudice against same-sex desire:

Throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the goddess [Natura] gained in stature and familiarity, here supporting popular prejudices, there creating new opinions, everywhere appearing as a beneficent and universally admired figure, until she was one of the most established and pervasive parts of the European intellectual apparatus—a position she has retained to the present day. By the opening of the thirteenth century her authority was virtually unquestioned; she reigned supreme in almost every intellectual sphere. And in the moral sphere she represented, thanks to the efforts of Alain de Lille and others, an exclusively heterosexual constituency.⁴⁵

Whatever debates Boswell's larger thesis has generated, the fundamental observation he makes here is indisputable: the concept of nature served to define sexual relations between men as decidedly taboo. Subsequent scholarship has extended this basic picture, demonstrating the breadth and depth of this proscription in the later Middle Ages and emphasizing especially its basis in attitudes toward bodies and who does what physically to whom.⁴⁶

What has received less attention is the specifically affective (as distinct from physical) component of desire between men under the regime of the natural and how attitudes toward such feelings may or may not have changed as proscriptions against sexual acts between men became more pervasive and severe. This subject deserves more extensive study than I can give it here. What I offer as a provisional hypothesis, however, is that the proscriptive reach of the concept of *unkyndenesse* did indeed extend to the emotions in such a way that eroticized emotions between men—even when physical union was impossible or irrelevant, as it was in the case of the relationship between the meditator and Christ—were themselves felt to be transgressive.

The Middle English *Cleanness* can serve as a touchstone here. It is now widely accepted that this poem condemns sexual relations between men and that it does so within the regulatory schema of *kynde* morality.⁴⁷ But a closer look reveals that the poem also condemns eroticized emotions of one man for another—and more specifically between male “friends”—in these terms. Just before the sinners are swept away by the flood, the poet gives this description of their affective bonds:

Frendez fellen in fere and fathmed togeder,
To drygh her delful deystyne and dyen alle samen;
Luf lokez to luf, and his leue taketh
For to ende alle at onez and for euer twynne.⁴⁸

The significance of this striking passage is open to interpretation. But it seems to me that it acknowledges powerful, intimate, affective bonds between men precisely in order to condemn those feelings—in order, that is, to define eroticized “luf” between men as an emotion that is both real and wrong and aligned in its wrongness with the physical intimacies between men that the God of *Cleanness* wants to drive from the earth.⁴⁹

By the late fourteenth century, *kynde* feelings are modeled on idealized kin relations, and affective intimacy between men can easily become a threat to such idealized relations. In this regard, it is important to recognize the different resonance that the term *unkynde* is likely to have had for men and for women. Men—through their schooling and through their absorption of cultural proscriptions by other means—were repeatedly made aware of the transgressive meaning of *unkyndenesse* in ways that women were not. The term was thus potentially far more troubling for male readers. And the trouble with *kyndenesse* in the Passion lyric in particular is that it contains two mutually exclusive directives for male readers. On the one hand, it asks men to perform loving compassion for Christ just as a lover—or, more pointedly, as an object of Christ’s romanticized love—should; failing to show this form of *kyndenesse* would be to display ingratitude, itself conceived of as an “unnatural” affective disposition, as Galloway has shown.⁵⁰ On the other hand, the genre asks men not to be *unkynde* in another sense: not to be “unnatural” in the sense of feeling eroticized affections for a man. Thus, such lyrics as “Man, folwe seintt Bernardes trace” are likely to have functioned differently for different categories of users. For female religious or for a lay woman like Margery Kempe, who says that she “desyryd many tymes that the Crucifix shuld losyn hys handys fro the crosse & halsyn hir in tokyn of lofe,” the image of Christ the lover offering his embraces does not transgress normative affective structures or emotional regimes.⁵¹ For male religious, its transgressive potential may also have been mitigated, since such men were liberated to a large extent from the constraints on gender identity operative in the secular world. But for lay men, Christ’s loving invitation operated in a different affective matrix; the appeal had a different structure. The appeal itself, in short, put men in danger in a way that was not true for women.

That danger was that of making men *unkynde* through the performative potential embedded especially in the lyric as genre. As we have seen, Christ in the late Passion lyrics reproaches the reader for *unkyndenesse*; indeed the conventional phrase in a poem by Lydgate—“be no more unkynd”—could serve as the leitmotif for the late lyrics as a whole.⁵² The dominant message in this plea not to be *unkynde* is the one we have explored: be more “natural,” which is to say softer of heart, more pitying, more grateful, more receptive to the loving advances of a worthy man. But for a man, such a command contained its own contradiction. To respond to Christ’s appeals as a *kynde* beloved should was for a man to risk becoming *unkynde* in the sense of morally unnatural. Thus, if Christ’s plea in the lyrics—“be not unkynde”—

seeks to move the male reader to render eroticized affections in the manner of a beloved, the cultural proscription hidden in this *double entendre*—"be not unnatural in your desires"—is also operative.

When it is recognized that the general context for emotion in late medieval England was one in which feelings are assumed to be under the control of the will, and therefore as open to moral scrutiny as acts, the lay male reader's predicament appears even more complex.⁵³ The time-honored construct of feminized, eroticized compassion now generates cognitive or affective dissonance. Thus, if the implied reader of the lyrics is cast as *dawngerous* in the medieval sense of reluctant and disdainful, it is in part because the affective drama is "dangerous" to the male meditator in the more familiar sense of that term: *unkynde* if he consents in his heart to Christ's plea; *unkynde* if he does not. Given these opposing pressures on the male reader, it is no wonder that the dominant impression of the late Passion lyrics is one of stasis and impasse, no wonder that the poems are, as Woolf noticed early on, less "moving" than those of the earlier meditative tradition.⁵⁴

This lack of movement is often dramatized as a failure of the inscribed meditator to return the gaze. "In the vaile of restles mynd," as we have seen, concludes with the averted gaze of the beloved, who refuses to be tempted by Christ's body, strikingly termed *bait* in this poem: "For all my membres I haf opynd hyr to; / My body I made hyr hertys baite." Eternally caught in Christ's amorous gaze, she will not turn her eyes toward his even once: "Yit myght thow, spouse, loke onys at me!"⁵⁵ In other poems, Christ depicts the reader's refusal to behold him as the worst of his pains, as in the following lyric from Grimestone's collection:

Senful man, be-thing & se
Quat peine i thole for loue of the.
Nith & day to the i grede,
Hand & fot on rode i-sprede.
Nailed i was to the tre,
Ded & biriyed, man, for the;
Al this i drey for loue of man,
But werse me dot, that he ne can
To me turnen onis is eyye,
Than al the peine that i dryye.⁵⁶

Resistance is also dramatized as a refusal to behold in many poems depicting the object of Christ's love as one who passes by the way: "Thow synfull man that by me gais / Ane quhyle to me thou turne thi face!"⁵⁷ Why so many downcast eyes? Because gazing into the lover's eyes is the external sign of the heart's assent.⁵⁸ In an imagined drama where affective rather than physical intimacy is the issue, to return a man's loving gaze—even when that man is also divine and thus not bound, himself, by worldly affective

constraints—is to risk committing a transgressive affective act.

All of this begs the question of the spiritual intent of the authors of the lyrics and the spiritual as well as affective value to their male users. One of Woolf's observations can help here. Among the reasons for what she sees as the inferior quality of the late Passion lyrics is the dominance of guilt in them, and "love and a guilty conscience," she notes, "can coincide only with difficulty."⁵⁹ While Woolf sees this uneasy juxtaposition as an aesthetic problem (one she attributes to a kind of affective obtuseness on the part of the authors of the lyrics), it can at least explain the affective discomfort produced by the lyrics in a way that makes sense in spiritual terms. If guilt is essentially displacing compassion in this period and in this genre, it may be that there was simply a stronger, more widespread desire to engage in penitential forms of devotion because lay men wished to save their souls.

But Woolf's comment raises another possibility: that guilt becomes the preferred emotion at this time precisely *because* "love and a guilty conscience can coincide only with difficulty." If love is now beset by difficulties, guilt becomes the easier, more comfortable emotion—one that works better for particular users in a particular historical matrix.

THE FRACTURING OF AN AFFECTIVE TRADITION

Up to this point, I have focused on how the primary kind of Passion lyric, the type featuring Christ as lover, becomes troubled in the later period. But there are other types of Passion lyric; indeed, the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries witness a rapid proliferation of kinds. In addition to the laments of the Virgin considered in the previous chapter, there are lyrics based on the motifs of the *arma Christi*, the charters of Christ, the *imago pietatis*, the name of Jesus, the five wounds, the precious blood, Christ's body as book, and others.⁶⁰ The sheer inventiveness evident in this explosion of motifs, along with energetic formal experimentation, has been taken as a sign of the robust health of the affective tradition, even up to the very brink of the Reformation.

But is energetic invention always a sign of health? Or might such energy be seen as evidence of the fracturing of a tradition, as attempts to find accommodation in an affective regime that no longer serves? These broad questions cannot be answered conclusively here. But as a means of initiating further debate, with respect to a genre that has so rarely been treated to such, I propose that the proliferation of these forms is best understood in relation to, and largely as a reaction to, the way compassion itself had been structured in the early lyric: that is, along an erotic axis, with "suede Jesu, my lemman" as its defining image. Attempts are made to find alternative intimate roles through which compassionate love can be fostered. "Brother" and "friend" get some play in the late Passion lyrics, for instance. But apart from the laments of the Virgin, these alternatives gain no real traction.⁶¹

Indeed, many of the later lyric kinds engage in what I see as forms of covert iconoclasm: Christ's body itself is broken up, covered over, allegorized, made to disappear. Wounds displace the whole, realistically imagined body; the instruments of the Passion substitute for the image of the lover; allegorical imagery (the wine press, the charter) disrupts intimacy with the one who suffers; statistics and abstractions (the number of drops of blood, the name of Jesus) divert readers from imagining Christ in the flesh.⁶² While scholarship on these lyric tropes and related visual imagery has situated them squarely within the affective tradition, it is at the very least worth beginning to notice more systematically what is absent, covered over, or obliterated in them (see [Figures 9 and 10](#)).

What such a reading practice might expose is a serious crack in the foundation of orthodoxy itself. Typically, the forces that shattered late medieval Catholicism have been located outside the ambit of the practices in which the orthodox regularly engaged.⁶³ But dissent may well have been occurring regularly, affectively, and covertly even among the most traditional of traditional Catholic men in the century preceding the Reformation.⁶⁴

This is a broad claim, and it will need to be tested by more evidence than I can provide here. But I offer in conclusion two brief case studies: the case of Lydgate and his patrons, and the case of Richard Hill, grocer.

LYDGATE'S EVASIONS

If any single writer can be said to reflect the tastes of the fifteenth-century English masculine elite, it is surely John Lydgate, the monk of Bury. Indeed, it is this perceived exemplary status that has led critics to find the study of Lydgate worthwhile.⁶⁵ It has seemed a dubious honor to most, particularly where the Passion lyric is concerned. Describing the decline of the genre, Woolf observes that Lydgate's poems on the Passion exemplify the distinctive characteristics of the late Passion lyric, including a "strong didactic coloring" and "a tone of fervour detached from either tenderness or love."⁶⁶ Derek Pearsall, too, notes Lydgate's departure from an earlier and superior affective tradition: "Lydgate wrote comparatively few poems on the Passion, and those that he did write have little to do with the tradition of intimate, passionate attachment to the body of Christ which plays so large a part in medieval lyric-writing."⁶⁷ In particular, Pearsall observes a distinction between the "devotional" and the "penitential": "The poems on *Cristes Passioun* and *The Dolerous Pyte of Crystes Passioun*, and the *Prayer Upon the Cross*, are penitential rather than devotional, using the crucifix, with which at least two of them are associated as text to picture, as a stimulus to repentance, just as the memorial of Christ's passion was used in the moralistic poems. There is a good deal of detail of the agonies of the Cross in these poems, but so laboriously accumulated and unimaginatively used as to

be completely without affective power.”⁶⁸ Pearsall aptly characterizes the *Fifteen Woes of Christ* as “a tedious exercise” and notes that the only other poem on the Passion, *A Seying of the Nightingale*, contains a Complaint of Christ “which merges into a moralistic account of the remedies against the seven sins that the Cross provides.”⁶⁹ The *Seying*’s inefficacy as a poem that might move the reader to loving compassion becomes all the more obvious when it is set beside its most direct ancestor in the tradition of the nightingale who sings of the Passion, John Pecham’s *Philomena*. Both poems stretch the bounds of the lyric through their sheer length, and both make heavy use of allegorical conceit. Yet Pecham succeeds in generating, “with the intense devotion of Bernardine and Franciscan writing,” as Pearsall puts it, “an anguished love and pity which can only be appeased in the sharing of Christ’s suffering.”⁷⁰ Lydgate’s poem falls so short of achieving this presumed goal that Pearsall suggests that he may have had “only the sketchiest knowledge” of Pecham’s wellknown exemplar.⁷¹

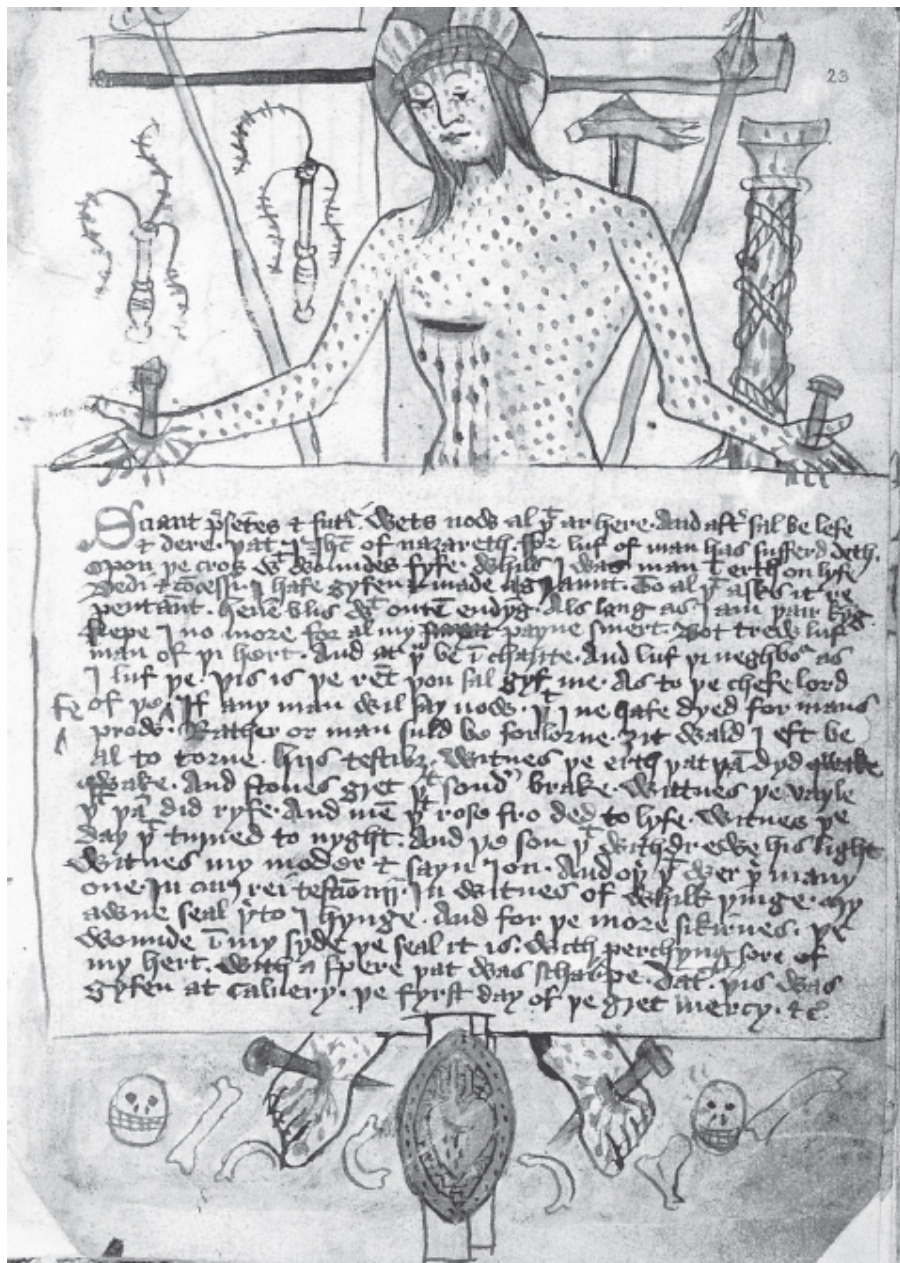


Figure 9. Christ's body covered by charter. London, British Library MS Additional 37049, f. 23r. ©British Library Board. All rights reserved.

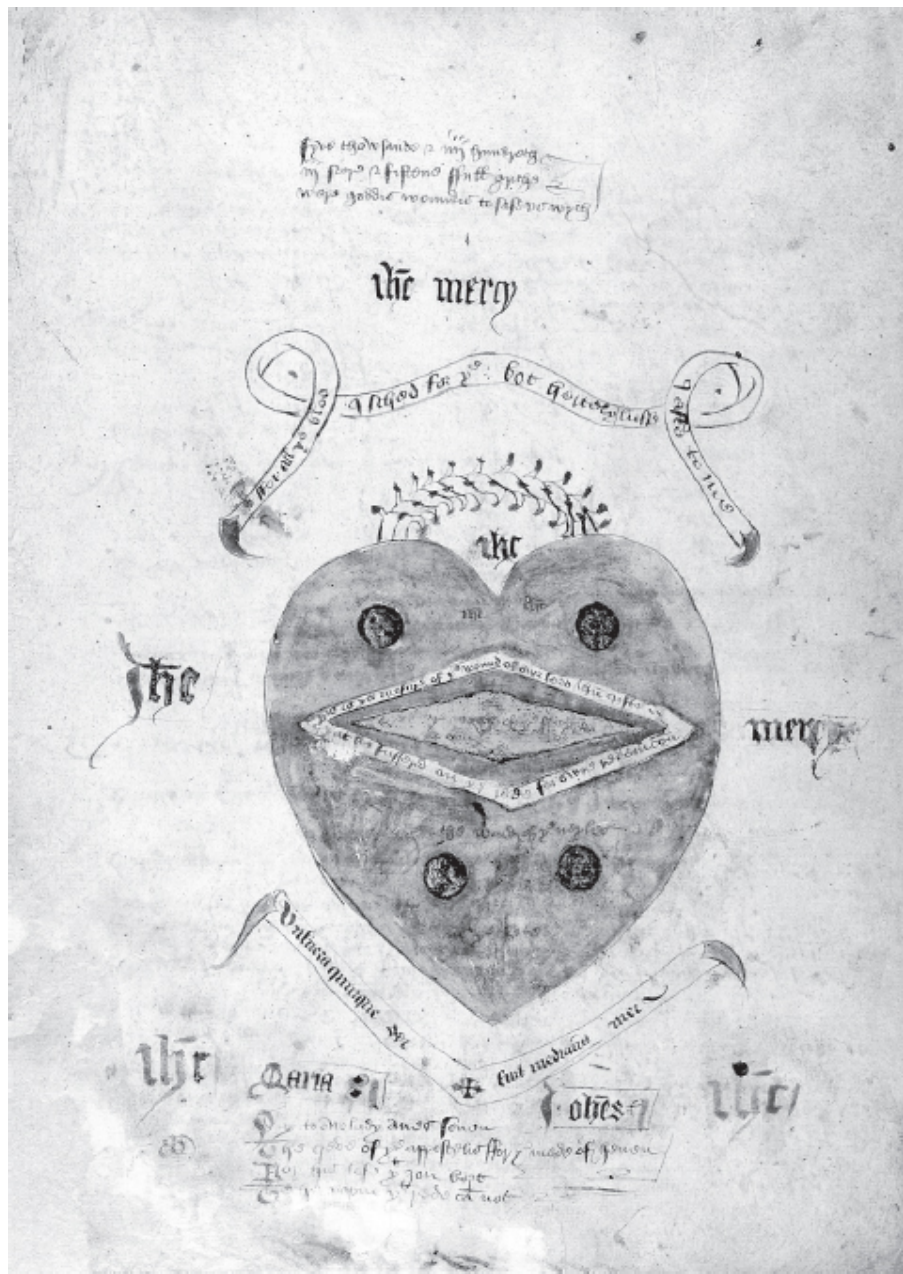


Figure 10. Heart with wound and emblem of crown of thorns from the commonplace book of Humphrey Newton. Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Lat. misc. 66, f. 129v. Reproduced by permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

It could be, however, that Lydgate has so little to offer in the intimate, compassionate lyric mode because fostering such intimacy was not his goal. His Passion poems seem to be serving other affective aims. The *Seying*, for

instance, is remarkably good at offering an experience of the Passion while deploying literary strategies that allow the reader to retain emotional distance.⁷² Lydgate here expends a great deal of rhetorical skill on swerving away from direct encounter with the central image in the affective tradition—the beautiful, disfigured body of Christ. That body is notable for its absence in this poem: it is the abstract and symbolic cross, not the emotionally charged crucifix, that Lydgate presents—and the hypertrophy of allegory here (as the cross becomes in quick succession the palm of victory, key of heaven, staff of Jacob, harp of David, tree of Moses, and tree of health) prompts the reader to think rather than to feel—or, if to feel, to feel joy at what was accomplished through the cross rather than compassion for the one who suffered there. The complexities of how this poem operates are considerable. But at base, it is a poem that lets the reader off the emotional hook, offering ways of imagining the Passion that do not demand the performance of intimate, compassionate love but rather stage this feeling in terms that allow the reader to remain at a distance—as male spectator witnessing a drama from which he himself is absented.

What makes Lydgate’s “failures” in the genre of the affective Passion lyric all the more striking is the compositional skill he demonstrates elsewhere. He was clearly talented and bold enough to try his hand at an astonishing array of genres, from epic to love poems to versified chronicles of abbeys to (of all things) a treatise for laundresses.⁷³ And he could clearly wrench the heart when he wished, as his *Lyf of Our Lady* shows. Modeled on the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditations*, the *Lyf* is a surpassingly good example of affective devotional writing.⁷⁴ The tenderness, sweetness, and intimacy of the scene of the suckling infant Jesus, for instance, proves how very well Lydgate understood the aims and techniques of the the affective tradition. In this text, Lydgate does not hesitate to exploit for affective effect the conflation of the maternal and the erotic, or to engage the reader’s sympathetic identification with Mary through direct interpellation, or to draw out the latent pathos of the scenes from the Infancy that typically serve as foreshadowings of the Passion. Yet here, too, he avoids the Passion itself. While the *Lyf* gives the impression that it will be a complete life of the Virgin, it stops abruptly, just before Christ becomes a man. To the various critical speculations concerning Lydgate’s decision not to finish this text, I would add that it is of a piece with Lydgate’s avoidance of affective writing on the Passion more generally—and thus likely to be a deliberate evasion. The stark absence of loving, compassionate engagement with Christ the suffering man, in other words, is less likely to be an accident of history than a telling indicator of history: it is symptomatic of the textual and emotional community for whom Lydgate was writing.

Lydgate, after all, served at the pleasure of patrons. Chronically short of funds, he was above all a professional rhetorician, one who knew which side his bread was buttered on and by whom: chiefly by powerful lay men. He

was a man's monk. It is true that he wrote a significant number of poems at the request of women.⁷⁵ But his known patrons were overwhelmingly worldly men intent on proving both their orthodoxy and their legitimate claims to political power. Serving as "poet-propagandist to the Lancastrian dynasty," Lydgate wrote for Henry V as well as for Henry's brothers Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, and John, duke of Bedford (in whose train he served in Paris); he wrote for William de la Pole, duke of Suffolk—the most powerful man in England between the death of Henry V and the coming of age of Henry VI—and for Thomas Monacture, earl of Salisbury.⁷⁶ Ongoing scholarship has continued to flesh out the details of the complex networks of aristocratic patronage shaping Lydgate's output, as well as the extent to which his works appealed to men of slightly lesser social rank: men such as John Paston and men of means like the London mercer Roger Thorney and the members of the wealthier London guilds.⁷⁷ Given these career pressures to produce writing that a lay male elite would want, it seems reasonable to conclude that Lydgate's apparent failures in the affective mode might actually represent success—a successful anticipation, that is, of what would serve the emotional needs of men who held, or perhaps more pointedly wished to hold, worldly power.

In fifteenth-century England, such power was newly predicated on maintaining the fiction of a stable, invariant masculinity. At the highest level, power had to be constructed in opposition to the court of Richard II and the dynastic line before him, in ways that other scholars with other interests have traced. Here, I wish to highlight the rejection of flexible or feminized forms of masculinity—and the accompanying narrowing of the range of acceptable emotional practices—that this reconfiguration of power entailed. The very public displays of affection between Richard and his favorite, Robert de Vere, may represent the last gasp in the English court of "ennobling love" between men. The relation of these emotional gestures to Richard's hold on power was consequential, especially in the retrospect constructed so aggressively in Lancastrian historiography.⁷⁸ A new affective regime thus seems to have entered with the Lancastrians, with Henry V as its chief exemplar. Henry V, in short, decisively seized the reins of power in part by performing a version of masculinity built on a binary opposition to all things feminine, including the rejection of Richard II's mode of loving—a way of loving that was in part responsible for defining Richard as unstable, effeminate, weak, not fit to rule.⁷⁹

A pervasive feature of Lydgate's style reflects and promotes this new version of masculinity: his relishing of binary oppositions. As Pearsall has observed of the *Troy Book*, written for Henry V while he was still Prince of Wales, Lydgate typically resorts to a "mechanism of contrast ... every shade of feeling is resolved into a straight antithesis."⁸⁰ Sharp contrasts are endemic to the *Siege of Thebes* as well: "At every possible point, Lydgate reaches out towards an antithetic structure of thought and expression."⁸¹ Indeed, this

habit pervades all of Lydgate's works, so much so that Pearsall locates its origins in Lydgate's fundamental mental processes: "Lydgate's mind, like a computer, operates thus on a binary system, which provides not only his philosophy but also his psychology."⁸² What I would add to this assessment is simply that Lydgate's mind existed in a culture, and external forces, particularly the pressures of patronage, must be considered for their generative power in shaping Lydgate's habits. Lydgate's success as a writer shows that he was an astute reader of the signs of the times, and those signs did indeed point toward "straight antitheses." Lydgate's straight, antithetical style is of a piece with the performance of straightness itself as a primary mechanism for establishing worldly power.

Producing affective lyrics on the Passion in such a context would have been a strategic mistake. The genre demands a flexibility in performing gender that posed a threat to the social standing of lay men; and for Lydgate, posing this threat to his patrons appears to have been too great a risk.

A GROCER AND GOD

Evidence of resistance to the affective intimacies of late medieval devotion among lay men is also provided by the commonplace book of Richard Hill, a wealthy London grocer (Oxford, Balliol MS 354).⁸³ This manuscript, written in Hill's own hand, has long been valued for the glimpse it offers into the interests of the merchant class of London in the early decades of the sixteenth century. Its contents include, among other things, notes on the births of Hill's children and events in his own life, parts of the *Confessio amantis* and *Gesta romanorum*, puzzles and card tricks, a formula for a business letter, instructions for the care of horses and trees, medical recipes, drinking songs, weights and monetary conversions, satires against women, a chronicle of the city of London, and a substantial collection of religious lyrics. Like most others who have examined the manuscript for the light it might shed on religious thought and practice just before the Reformation, Eamon Duffy concludes that "Hill was clearly a traditional Catholic, untouched by the reforming currents already evident in the city in the 1520s"—an assessment based not only on Hill's inclusion of texts like the "Pope Trental" or the "Merits of the Mass" but also on the "enormous collection of devotional verses" in the volume.⁸⁴ Duffy offers the Hill manuscript as a prime example of the "richness" of traditional religion in the early sixteenth century, seeing this richness primarily in the lyrics, which add an emotional "depth and resonance" to what would otherwise be a "rather dry and schematic" collection of religious material.⁸⁵ Looked at more closely, however, Hill's collection reveals something more subtle. Embedded within what I would agree is an orthodox religion is a significant crack in the foundation of that religion: an aversion to the image of the suffering Christ and to the intimate, compassionate love that that image had come to

demand. And it is the collection of lyrics in this manuscript—not only in their manifest subject matter but also more precisely in the ways that they can be shown to work, affectively and performatively—that exposes this important vulnerability in late medieval Catholicism.

The primary evidence for aversion is quite simply an avoidance of the subject of the Passion.⁸⁶ Strikingly, in a collection of seventy-one lyrics, only eight concern the Passion, and all of them do so obliquely. One conflates meditation on the Passion with meditation on the Eucharist, three are carols on the Nativity, three are laments of the Virgin, and one is the Corpus Christi carol. The numbers strongly suggest that the Passion is not a subject on which Hill wished to dwell, and there are no paleographical grounds on which we might conclude that Hill used the few Passion lyrics with special frequency or considered them more compelling than the other poems in the volume. The Corpus Christi carol, for instance—that rare and enigmatic lyric that has held such fascination for modern scholars—appears here with no special rubrics or annotations.

In compiling this manuscript, Hill avoids the Passion as much as it would be possible to do by a lay man of means who seeks in so many other ways to assert his credentials as an orthodox Catholic. In itself, this avoidance could be taken as evidence of the kind of covert iconoclasm that I have been seeking to illuminate. But equally telling is the fact that each of the eight lyrics that deal with the Passion offer formal accommodation to a man who does not wish to feel intimate, eroticized compassion for the suffering Christ. They deploy an impressive array of distancing techniques that might allow a man such as Hill to meet his affective obligation to respond to the Passion—without actually performing feminized or eroticized feelings.

One of the lyrics, for instance, ingeniously casts up an imagistic obstacle by allegorizing the body of Christ as an “ere of whet.”⁸⁷ The primary image to which the reader is asked to relate is thus that of wheat being beaten, bound, and scourged. If a human body is invoked for contemplation here, it is only at its furthest recesses, its fingertips:

This corn was repyn & layd to grownd,
Full sore beten & faste bownd
Vnto a piler with cordis rownd,
At his fynghers endis the blod ran owt that day.⁸⁸

Allegorical conceits can, of course, enrich and extend the affective power of the image of the suffering Christ. But this should not blind us to another kind of power that allegorical imagery potentially possesses: the power to divert or deflect affective response precisely by requiring the intellectual work of decoding. That it is the latter function that is chiefly served here can be seen through the way this poem proceeds: instead of allowing the human body of Christ to become fully established and then embellished or amplified in meaning through allegory, this poem permits only the briefest glimpse of

that body before the image of wheat masks it again:

Jhesu vpon his body the crosse bare;
Water & blode cam from hym ther;
This corn was skorged all in fere,
Tyll it wexed blode rede.⁸⁹

What is being asked here is that the reader recall that the Eucharist is the body of Christ and, more obliquely, that the Mass is a reenactment of the Passion. The lyric thus swerves from direct, sustained, emotional engagement with the suffering Christ. At any moment, the reader can choose for the entire lyric to be more “about” the Eucharist than the Passion.

As for the lyric that has come to be known as the *Corpus Christi* carol, this becomes a Passion lyric only through an act of decoding a set of images that are, on the face of it, secular, belonging primarily to the world of ballad and romance. That this lyric has significant devotional potential is clear: the final stanza reveals that “by that beddis side ther stondith a ston, / ‘Corpus Christi’ wretyn ther-on.”⁹⁰ As it stands, however, it is an enigmatic ballad about an eternally bleeding knight and a weeping maiden. Critics have remarked on its affinities with the grail legends and with Marie de France’s “Yonec.”⁹¹ Its placement in Hill’s manuscript does nothing to settle the question as to whether Hill perceived it as secular or religious, for it appears between a secular text (a conduct book) and a religious one (a carol on the three kings).

But if we grant that Hill perceived and used it as a devotional lyric, what then? On the most basic level, it permits the reader to avoid imagining the exposed and wounded body of Christ on the cross, replacing that body with an image of a knight “yn” a bed—the preposition suggesting that even the figure of the knight may be concealed by the golden hangings mentioned in the previous stanza. The kneeling maiden then functions as a triangulating device, a further buffer between the reader and the Christ-knight. Performatively, the reader is given the option of identifying with her or observing her as spectator. Either way, masculine identity is protected: the maiden serves as a fully realized character who can do the emotional work of pitying Christ, and given this ever-present vicarious option, a male reader has a perpetual cover even if he does feel and weep for Christ. Indeed, the woman can function as the primary object of compassion. She thus allows the reader to feel eroticized compassion for Christ, while at the same time having his credentials as heterosexual man perpetually protected and reconstituted through the act of feeling eroticized pity for a sorrowing woman.

Interpretations of this ballad have tended to assume that its unique survival in Hill’s manuscript is an accident of history—and that its indirect, haunting, enigmatic quality is at odds with a grocer’s mentality. Indeed, it seems to be at odds with the material form of the manuscript itself, which is

a narrow tradesman's account book. No meaningful or necessary connection has ever been posited between this ballad and the grocer who chose to copy it into his book. But when analyzed as a script for producing emotion and gender, it seems to fit the performance needs of a man who seeks in the early decades of the sixteenth century to feel compassion for Christ without compromising the kind of straight, masculine identity that his social position (London merchant, husband of the mayor's daughter, father of eight) demanded. The ballad is an affective technology supremely suited to its times—and to the only medieval user we can confidently identify.

INTRODUCTION

1. To call this body of writings a genre is to group together a wide range of forms as they appear in multiple languages over a broad span of time (ca. 1050–1530). I do so because there is no clearly preferable alternative in current use in the scholarship. Indeed the term *affective meditation* has never been defined with precision as a literary kind, and it is often used in a loosely interchangeable manner with other terms (including *Passion meditation*, *poetry of the Passion*, *affective devotions*, and *meditations on Christ's humanity*). I espouse here a broad functionalist definition of the genre similar to that advanced by C. W. Marx, who calls this body of writings “the literature of compassion” and defines it as “the literature which encourages ‘suffering with’ Mary and Christ and emotional participation in the drama of the passion” (Marx, “The Middle English Verse ‘Lamentation of Mary to Saint Bernard,’” 139). It could be said that what unites the disparate forms of affective meditation is *mode*, which Paul Alpers defines as “the way the poem works,” not only in its internal logic but also in the way it seeks to engage the reader’s mind and emotions. “What is it like to read?” thus becomes a key question in classifying texts (Alpers, “Mode in Narrative Poetry,” 25–56; see also Fowler, “Mode and Subgenre,” in *Kinds of Literature*, 106–29). This is not to say that there are no formal, thematic or rhetorical features that distinguish this literary kind from others, including other types of prayers on the Passion intended chiefly for use in private devotions; recurring features will be described in the course of this study. Many late medieval hymns and Passion plays also seek to elicit compassionate response, but their essentially public, communal aspect has led most scholars to consider them to be separate genres, as I do here (but for a recent, fruitful investigation of the conflation between “public” and “private” devotional kinds, see Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*).

2. Love, *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, 171.

3. Brook, *The Harley Lyrics*, 59.

4. Savage and Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 255.

5. Carleton Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century*, 7.

6. J.A.W. Bennett, *Poetry of the Passion*, 32.

7. Influential studies in anthropology include Lutz, *Unnatural Emotions*; Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*; and Lutz and White, “The Anthropology of Emotions.” Representative work in the history of emotion includes Stearns and Lewis, *An Emotional History of the United States* and other studies in the History of Emotion series published by New York University Press; Miller, *Humiliation*; Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion*; Paster, *The Body Embarrassed* and *Humoring the Body*; Paster, Rowe, and Floyd-Wilson, *Reading the Early Modern Passions*; Konstan, *Pity Transformed* and *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*; Braund and Most, *Ancient Anger*; Gross, *The Secret History of Emotion*; Kaster, *Emotion, Restraint, and Community in Ancient Rome*; Rosenwein, *Anger's Past* and *Emotional Communities*. These studies vary in their assumptions and arguments regarding the degree to which emotions are socially constructed. In this study, I adopt the “weaker thesis” of constructionism as articulated by Claire Armon-Jones in “The Thesis of Constructionism.” The “weaker” thesis allows for the possibility that some aspects of emotional response or experience have a basis in biological predispositions, while still granting significant generative and shaping power to cultural influences.

8. Morrison, “*I Am You*,” xix. Konstan’s work on ancient Greece provides an important and illuminating exception; see *Pity Transformed* and chapter 10, “Pity,” in *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, 201–18.

9. See esp. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*; Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary*; Beckwith, *Christ’s Body*; Bestul, *Texts of the Passion*; and Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion*. I engage with Fulton’s work at length in [Chapter 2](#). Holsinger’s *Music, Body, and Desire* also offers a major contribution to the history of compassion without calling it such.

10. Berlant, *Compassion*, 7.

11. Nussbaum, “Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion.”

12. Berlant, *Compassion*, 4.

13. In addition to the studies by Beckwith and Holsinger cited above, see esp. Aers and Staley, *The Powers of the Holy*; Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers*; and Bryan, *Looking Inward*.

14. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 297–441.

15. Rosenwein, “Worrying About Emotions in History.”

16. Corrigan, Crump, and Kloos, *Emotion and Religion*.

17. Corrigan, *Religion and Emotion*, 5.

18. *Ibid.*, 5–6.

19. This study thus offers an alternative to what has now become the standard history of the late medieval shift in sensibility, Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion*.

20. Ekman’s foundational study, deeply indebted to Darwin, is *Emotion in the Human Face*.

21. Lutz, *Unnatural Emotions*, 5.

22. Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 153.

23. Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault*, xxvi.

24. The concept of emotions as “overlearned cognitive habits” has been particularly influential; see Isen and Diamond, “Affect and Automaticity.”

25. Chap. 5, “Need, Nurturance, and the Precariousness of Life on a Coral Atoll: The Emotion of *fago* (Compassion/Love/Sadness),” in Lutz, *Unnatural Emotions*, 119–54.

26. I cannot do justice here to Lutz’s perceptive and subtle analysis of how material and geographical conditions promote the practice of *fago*, but her comments on the “bounded nature” of Ifaluk society are especially astute. Suffering in such a society is more visible and less readily supplied with an invisible source for its alleviation: “The boundedness of the atoll has meant that Ifaluk’s citizens have been able to observe, until quite recently, the limits and extent of their social system and the sources of support within it. Contrast this with the situation in large-scale peasant or industrial societies, where unseen actors may be posited as the agents responsible for helping others. Research in the United States has indicated that helping behavior is diminished when a person can assume that someone else can or should help the sufferer or victim.... The concept of *fago* encodes the responsibility which each person has to respond to others’ pain” (*Unnatural Emotions*, 151).

27. *Ibid.*, 131.

28. *Ibid.*, 140. Lutz explicitly contrasts the connections among *fago*, power, and gender on Ifaluk with the relation between power and compassion in the contemporary United States. Noting that Ifaluk society is “at once ranked and egalitarian in structure,” Lutz writes: “The character of the emotion of *fago*, and its positive evaluation, provides an avenue for the exercise of power. It does this by sanctioning the display of resources and abilities in the act of helping others. *Fago* is an emotion whose exercise can be consistent both with equality and autonomy and with rank and control” (152). The “relatively powerful position of women on Ifaluk” is “reinforced by the cultural ideology surrounding the concept of *fago*—an ideology which defines their provision of food and their care of children as indices of both their maturity and their superordinate social position. Western ethnotheory tends, in contrast, to emphasize the softness or even the weakness of the person who nurtures. The nurturant person may be seen as morally noteworthy, but caring for others is an activity

that tends to place one further down rather than up in sociopolitical ranking. Mothers, women more generally, and those who are engaged in personal-service occupations—each category of which is culturally defined as nurturant—have lower status than fathers, men, and non-service jobs. The explicit idiom for power is force rather than compassion” (143–44).

29. Ibid., 126.

30. Lutz writes that “*fago* is rarely used to talk about sexual relationships, and this is not merely because taboos surround discourse about the latter.” She hypothesizes that this is because *fago* “may in fact involve an assessment of the other person as weak or incapable of providing for the self” and that this assessment is at odds with the “admiration” necessary for romantic love (145).

31. Davidson and Harrington, *Visions of Compassion*, v.

32. Ibid., 237–38. The Dalai Lama amplifies his response by noting that “Buddhism does speak about the difference in the intensity of emotions at different ages, or depending on the constitution of the body. So there may be some slight differences between men and women in terms of their disposition toward particular types. But fundamentally there cannot be any real difference” (238).

33. This is the Dalai Lama’s definition, in Davidson and Harrington, *Visions of Compassion*, 98. Whether such “wishing” is an emotion is a fair question, one Georges Dreyfus assesses in his essay “Is Compassion an Emotion? A Cross-Cultural Exploration of Mental Typologies” (*Visions of Compassion*, 31–45). Although Dreyfus does not reach any firm conclusions—in part because, as he observes, the nature of emotion itself is “up for grabs” (34)—his articulation of the various “mental factors” evident in Buddhist meditation theory exposes some significant differences between *tsewa* and medieval compassion. While intense sadness and distress are associated with—indeed define—the latter, they have little or no place in ideal forms of *tsewa*. Skill in the practice of Buddhist meditation, the chief site for the cultivation of *tsewa*, is marked by the ability of the practitioner to achieve equanimity, to move “beyond sadness” to a strong feeling of desire to help those who are suffering. As Houshmand and colleagues put it: “Sadness is not a necessary or essential component of compassion; compassion could be experienced with equanimity instead of sadness. In fact, the highest realization of compassion, known technically as ‘uncontrived spontaneous great compassion,’ is a direct and spontaneous reaction to suffering that does not involve sadness as an intermediate stage. Distinct facial expressions were also ascribed to sadness and compassion. Sadness appears ‘as if the face collapses,’ while compassion manifests as an intent focus on the other who is suffering, with an expression of affection and gentleness” (Houshmand et al., “Training the Mind,” in *Visions of Compassion*, 3–17, at 15).

34. *Visions of Compassion*, 23.

35. Ibid., 15.

36. Davidson summarizes his findings, gained primarily through the use of neuroimaging technologies on Tibetan monks engaged in meditation, in “Toward a Biology of Positive Affect and Compassion,” in *Visions of Compassion*, 107–30. Davidson’s studies and the discussions of Tibetan Buddhist compassion in this volume take the practices of monks as representative and do not consider those of Buddhist nuns.

37. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 297–454, esp. 301–4; Konstan, *Pity Transformed and The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*. Nussbaum chooses not to use the English *pity* because this term has “recently come to have nuances of condescension and superiority to the sufferer” (301); she notes, however, that *pity* and *compassion* are often used interchangeably in English philosophical texts of the eighteenth century, as, for example, in Hobbes, *Leviathan* (303). Konstan distinguishes pity from compassion, devoting a chapter of *Pity Transformed* to this subject (Chap. 2, “Pity vs. Compassion”). This distinction is not based primarily on Greek terminology, however; the emotion Konstan terms “compassion” is a “less theorized conception of pity as an unmediated response to suffering as such” (48). It is

some-times designated by the term *oiktos* (which can mean “pity/grief” or “compassionate grief,” 54) rather than *eleos* (“pity”), but not always. On the complex implications of the translation of emotion terms, see esp. Wierzbicka, *Emotions Across Languages and Cultures*.

38. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 306–7.

39. While Konstan states that his object is “not so much to capture the essence of pity, whether ancient or modern, as to exhibit its several facets” (*Pity Transformed*, 25), capturing a transhistorical “essence” is precisely Nussbaum’s aim as a philosopher. Both take Aristotle’s definition of *eleos* in the *Rhetoric* (2.8.2) to be particular telling: for Konstan, of pity’s historicity; for Nussbaum, of compassion’s ahistorical structure. Aristotle’s definition reads as follows: “Let pity, then, be a kind of pain in the case of an apparent destructive or painful harm in one not deserving to encounter it, which one might expect oneself, or one of one’s own, to suffer, and this when it seems near” (qtd. in Konstan, *Pity Transformed*, 49).

40. Konstan cites R. Ferwerda on this point. Ferwerda writes: “Should the Greeks wish to give expression to a deeper feeling of sympathy (suffering together), they use the word *sullupeisthai*. This is a privilege reserved for a small circle of intimate friends” (qtd. in *Pity Transformed*, 59). Konstan translates *sunalgein* as “feel pain with”; *sullupeisthai* and *sunakthesthai*, “feel pain or grieve with”; and *sumponein*, “struggle or toil with” (58). According to Konstan, these terms claim far less attention in Greek philosophy and literature, which itself suggests that they had less significance in Greek culture. The conception of compassion encoded in the *sun* terms is distinct from what Konstan calls pity in this sense: “These terms did not entail moral judgment in the way that pity commonly did,” and “they were generally limited ... to relations between intimate friends or relatives” (13). Konstan further observes that Aristotle uses the terms *sunalgein* and *sullupeisthai* not in his general discussions of pity but in the context of analyzing love (*philia*). The ability to participate in another’s grief or joy is a defining feature of love. In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Konstan notes, Aristotle writes that “some people define a friend precisely as one who suffers and rejoices ... with one who is dear or *philos*. Aristotle comments in passing that mothers in particular meet this condition—they are his paradigm of natural and selfless love” (59).

41. Konstan, *Pity Transformed*, 59. Konstan alludes only briefly to Roman pity; for an extended analysis of the closely related concept of *humanitas*, see Braund, “Roman Assimilations of the Other.”

42. Even recent attempts at a very basic definition do not hold up under the pressure of cross-cultural analysis. Berlant, for instance, posits that compassion exerts a “claim on the spectator to become an ameliorative actor” (*Compassion*, 1); yet this is not how the emotion always or even often functions in the context of medieval devotion, where the suffering and death of Christ are said to be necessary and right—sanctioned by an allknowing Father, and thus not to be “ameliorated.” Or, to take another example, Nussbaum writes that compassion “is a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person’s undeserved misfortune” (*Upheavals of Thought*, 301). Yet Richard Davidson’s neurological imaging techniques have shown that Tibetan Buddhist monks adept in the practice of *tsewa* appear to experience this emotion with a sense of wellbeing; it is not “painful” in the sense Nussbaum assumes to be universal.

43. The Middle English term *compassioun* is a relatively late term for the feeling of suffering with another, appearing in 1340 and deriving from both Latin and Old French (*Middle English Dictionary* *compassioun*, n.). The primary sense, the “sharing of suffering with another, commiseration” (*MED* 1), is especially well-attested in the *Book of Margery Kempe* (“Sche had teerys of compassyon in the mende of owyr Lordys Passyon”; “Sche had plentivows teerys of compunccon & of compassyon in the rememorawns of the bittyr peynys & passyons which owr merciful Lord Ihesu Crist suffyrd”). It is often used interchangeably with *pitee* and *reuthe*. In the example, “haue rewe, pytee, and compassyon of alle as a moder wolde haue of her chylde,” the three terms are used together for emphasis, and no significant difference between them is elaborated (*MED* *compassioun*, 2a). Other

examples of the doubling of vocabulary for emphasis, rather than to highlight different shades of meaning, include, for definition (2a), “Sympathy, compassion,” a passage from the *Knight of La Tour Landry*, “Eliseus had pitee and compassion vpon this holy woman,” and for definition (2b), “compassion along with a desire to help, pity,” a passage from Pecoock’s *Rule*: “Thi greet routhe and compassioun ... vpon the perel of oure gretter fal into sijkenes or into synne.” Another entry (listed under *pite* 2a, “a feeling of pity aroused by the suffering, distress, grief, etc., of another, sympathy, commiseration”) includes an example from a text dated 1440: “Have pyte, or ruthe: Compacior.” *Reuthe*—“pity, compassion, sympathy”—has an older pedigree in Middle English, appearing often in thirteenth-century texts. The degree to which *pitee* and *reuthe* are used synonymously is especially evident in a definition of *ruful* dating from 1475: “ruful, or ful of roth and pyte.” From the late fourteenth century on, however, *pitee*, in both religious and secular texts and contexts, does seem to designate a cognitive and social structure that differs from the emotion that is my primary focus. *Pitee* is often structured vertically; it suggests condescension from a superior to an inferior and relatedly often appears in the sources as an emotion that men perform—“as” men—toward women. On this, see especially Riddey, “Engendering Pity in the ‘Franklin’s Tale’”; Strohm, “Queens as Intercessors,” in *Hochon’s Arrow*; Gray, “Chaucer and ‘Pite’”; and Mann’s comments on *pitee* in *Feminizing Chaucer*, esp. and 134–42.

44. See, for example, W. Gerrod Parrott and Rom Harré, “Embarrassment and the Threat to Character,” esp. 42–46. Parrott and Harré adopt the concept of “family resemblances” from Wittgenstein. On the difficulty of defining “emotion” itself, see Paul Griffiths, *What Emotions Really Are*. Griffiths argues that emotion is not a natural kind—and thus that “there is an important sense in which the emotions do not really exist” (1).

45. Although compassion is often conflated with “compunction” in the scholarship, they are distinguished by the dominance of guilt in the latter. The OED’s definition of *compunction*—“pricking or stinging of the conscience or heart; regret or uneasiness of mind consequent on sin or wrong-doing; remorse, contrition” (1)—has its roots in early Christian Latin usage. One obvious way to distinguish compassion from compunction in medieval texts and images is by those who exemplify them: the Virgin, whom tradition cast as wholly without sin, is the chief exemplar of compassion, while the repentant sinner Magdalene is usually (though not always) the primary model of compunction. For a fulllength study of medieval compunction, whose prominence in Christian writings and devotional practices preceded that of compassion and which continued to serve as a basis for the penitential practices of the later Middle Ages, see McEntyre, *The Doctrine of Compunction in Medieval England*. Kaster offers an illuminating discussion of the related emotion of *paenitentia* in its pre-Christian form in *Emotion, Restraint, and Community in Ancient Rome*, 66–83.

46. Sylvan Tomkins was one of the first to develop this concept, in “Script Theory.”

47. The first term is developed by Reddy in *The Navigation of Feeling*; the second, by Rosenwein in “Worrying About Emotions in History” and *Emotional Communities*. Hochschild’s influential study, *The Managed Heart*, is one among many others that assume a concept of emotion scripts.

48. See, for instance, Hyams, *Rancor and Reconciliation in Medieval England*, and Smail, *The Consumption of Justice*.

49. Lutz, for example, frequently uses a vocabulary of performance in her anthropological analysis but clearly deploys this vocabulary metaphorically; she describes two of her subjects as activating “similar scenarios of nurturance, invoking a script that calls for active caring for the other,” and so on (*Unnatural Emotions*, 122).

50. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*, 104–5.

51. Rosenwein, “Worrying About Emotions in History.” Rosenwein mounts a lively critique of one of the first historians of medieval emotion, Norbert Elias, for his uncritical assumption of a “hydraulic” model (Rosenwein’s term) in *The Civilizing Process*, originally published in 1939.

52. In addition to the work on feuding and reconciliation noted above, see Cheyette and

Chickering, "Love, Anger, and Peace," and McNamer, "Feeling."

53. LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain*, 19.

54. *Ibid.*

55. There is a significant body of medieval theory of the emotions that posits that emotions are or ought to be under the control of the will; for an overview, see Knuuttila, *Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*.

56. In this study I rely on Butler's most succinct definition of gender performativity as articulated in her 1988 essay, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution": "Gender reality is performative, which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed"; gender attributes "effectively constitute the identity that they are said to express or reveal. The distinction between expression and performativeness is quite crucial, for if gender attributes and acts, the various ways a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. That gender reality is created through sustained social performance means that the very notions of an essential sex, a true or abiding masculinity or femininity, are also constituted as part of the strategy by which the performative aspect of gender is concealed" (Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 528).

57. Shields, *Speaking from the Heart*, 93. Important recent work on gender and emotion also includes A. Fischer, ed., *Gender and Emotion*, and Petersen, *Engendering Emotions*.

58. Bynum, "Wonder."

59. "Toute vue des choses qui n'est pas étrange est fausse" ("Every view of things that is not strange [i.e., bizarre or foreign] is false") (Bynum, "Wonder," 1; the translation is Bynum's). Bynum writes eloquently of her own early work, in which she sought to "jolt my listeners and readers into encounter with a past that is unexpected and strange, a past whose lineaments are not what we at first assume" ("Wonder," 1). She describes this essay as an attempt to think about "the intellectual challenges to the historian's task that engage me most.... Could a penchant for the strange help us to avoid what Patricia Limerick has identified as a presentist flattening of the past?" (1); "could 'wonder' be the special characteristic of the historian?" (2).

60. The title of Bynum's first book on gender and religion, *Jesus as Mother*, represents this quest for what "jolts" modern sensibilities. While Bynum herself does not claim in this initial study that images of Christ as feminized are the norm in the Middle Ages, her work has often been cited as if it stands as evidence of this. With Leo Steinberg, I see Christ's maleness not only as the default (he is, even when feminized, a man) but powerfully operative in medieval configurations of affect; see Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*. While this conclusion does not "jolt," it is indicative of one of the core methods I adopt in this book: a willingness to state the obvious.

61. I am particularly influenced here by Bourdieu's *Masculine Domination*. In his preface to the English edition, Bourdieu writes: "One has to ask what are the *historical* mechanisms responsible for the *relative dehistoricization* and *eternalization* of the structure of the sexual division and the corresponding principles of division.... To point out that what appears, in history, as being eternal is merely the product of a labour of eternalization performed by interconnected institutions such as the family, the church, the state, the educational system ... is to reinsert into history, and therefore to restore to historical action, the relationship between the sexes that the naturalistic and essentialist vision removes from them" (vii–viii). Bourdieu's comments on the importance of examining the invariants in history merit consideration alongside Bynum's privileging of the variants. "Here," Bourdieu writes, "one has to confront a new paradox, entailing a complete revolution in the approach to what researchers have aimed to study under the rubric of 'women's history': do not the invariants which, beyond all the visible changes in the position of women, are observed in the relations of domination between the sexes require one to take as one's privileged object

the historical mechanisms and institutions which, in the course of history, have continuously abstracted these invariants from history?" (4).

62. J.A.W. Bennett, *Poetry of the Passion*, 34.

63. Woolf, *English Religious Lyric*, 259.

CHAPTER 1. COMPASSION AND THE MAKING OF A TRUE *SPONSA CHRISTI*

1. The relevant folios are f. 131r and ff. 132v–133r. The text on these pages is that of the Passion section. Two folios on either side of the text of the *Wooing*, f. 126r and f. 134v, also have letters that are partially effaced. While I recognize that the cause of the damage to these folios remains debatable, indications that the effacement of letters was caused by handling are as follows. First, there are some folios in the manuscript where the parchment has a similarly waxy feel (e.g., 143r and 147r) but the writing remains clearly legible. Second, the writing on the *inside* columns of the *Wooing*'s compromised folios is not damaged, even though the quality of the parchment there is also poor. The editor of the *Wooing* assumes (without comment) that the effacement has been caused by rubbing: see Thompson, *The Wohunge of Ure Lauerd*, 31, 36, 37.

2. Owners prior to Sir Robert Bruce Cotton (1571–1631) are not known, but the table of exotic alphabets added in a fifteenth-century hand suggests that the manuscript was even at that time a collector's item valued for its distinctive thirteenth-century lettering rather than its contents. For a summary of the handful of studies up to 1995, see Millett, *Ancrene Wisse, the Katherine Group, and the Wooing Group*. More recent studies include Renevey, "Enclosed Desires: A Study of the Wooing Group"; Salih, "Queering *sponsalia Christi*"; and Chewning, "Mi bodi henge / with thi bodi."

3. Savage and Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 257. All translations from the *Wooing* and other texts from the Titus manuscript (which also includes *Ancrene Wisse*, *Sawles Warde*, *Holy Maidenhood*, and the *Life of St. Katherine*) are from Savage and Watson. For the benefit of Middle English specialists, I cite from the original as well: "Prei for me mi leue suster. This haue i writen the for thi that wordes ofte quemen the heorte to thenken on ure lauerd. And for thi hwen thu art on eise carpe toward iesu and seie thise wordes. And thenc as tah he heng biside the blodi up o rode. And he thurh his grace opne thin heorte to his luue and to reowthe of his pine" (37–8). All parenthetical citations for the Middle English text of the *Wooing* refer to page numbers in Thompson, *The Wohunge of Ure Lauerd*; I have, however, supplied modern punctuation and capitalization and sometimes altered the line spacing in the interest of readability.

4. The most comprehensive studies of anchoresses in England are Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England*, and Elkins, *Holy Women of Twelfth-Century England*. The conclusion of the *Ancrene Wisse* explicitly invites daily use: "Read from this book in your leisure time every day, much or little" (207). This instruction might be thought to include the reading of any other things in the "book." In light of this instruction, it may be particularly significant that the *Wooing* is the *only* text given a rubricated title in the manuscript. It is clear that this functioned as a finding aid, especially in conjunction with the rare patch of space left blank at the conclusion of the text. Further, the opening initial "I" is colored green and red; and there is a prominent rubricated and entirely capitalized *AMEN* at the end of the *Wooing*. These features seem designed to catch the eye, particularly when they are compared to the unrubricated initials elsewhere in the manuscript (e.g. f. 141v and 142v) and the small, unrubricated *amen* at the conclusion of the *Ancrene Wisse* (f. 112v).

5. While not solely dedicated to the *Wooing*, Watson's 1987 article remains the most sympathetic commentary on this text's "concrete" language and spiritual aims; see "The Methods and Objectives of Thirteenth-Century Anchorite Devotion."

6. For the most succinct version of Bynum's argument, see "... And Woman His Humanity": Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages," in Bynum, Harrell, and Richman, eds., *Gender and Religion*, 257–88. Bynum's more extended

discussions appear in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* and *Jesus as Mother*. The scholarship on women and affective devotion—built on the foundational work of Bynum, Herbert Grundmann, André Vauchez, Barbara Newman, and Jeffrey Hamburger—is too extensive to cite comprehensively. My practice in what follows is thus to refer only to studies with a very direct bearing on my argument.

7. The most incisive critique of Bynum's broad arguments is Biddick's "Gender, Bodies, Borders."

8. In tracing a literal, legal thread through twelfth- and thirteenth-century texts for female religious, I present a different reading from that offered by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne in *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture, c. 1150–1300*. For Wogan-Browne, who examines a body of texts closely related to the *Wooing* (Middle English and Anglo-Norman lives of virgin martyrs), nuptial language is metaphorical, "a surface trope of virgin sanctity, the rhetorical face of more complex narratives concerned with what I am calling 'dotality,' the virgin's capacity to be given and to give" (*Saints' Lives*, 17). However, many of Wogan-Browne's comments on the functions of "spiritual nuptial romance" (5) could be applied to the texts and contexts I discuss in this chapter. Indeed, one of Wogan-Browne's opening interpretive gestures is worth citing in full: "The thematics of *passio* can seem depressing, part of a powerful patriarchal metanarrative about women in which death [or, in the case of affective meditations, co-suffering] thematizes the principal nexus of the maiden to European conventions of representation. If this is the case, matters are perhaps not much helped when women themselves engage with the genre"; yet "the pervasiveness of a representational code is a different matter from the politics and possibilities of its particular instantiations. What looks potentially dreary or appalling at the aerial-survey level of genre-history takes on life, multiplicity, and nuance at the level of particular texts in their contexts" (*Saints' Lives*, 5).

9. See esp. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. The concept of "goal relevance," as developed in the literature on the psychology of emotion, provides an additional framework for understanding the crucial role of motivation in the constitution and practice of emotion; see P. C. Ellsworth and K. Scherer, "Appraisal Processes in Emotion."

10. "Ne mai i naman give mi luue to swettere biyete" (22).

11. "A hu liue I for reowthe, that seo mi mi lefmon up o rode & swa to drahen hise limes that I mai in his bodi euch ban tellen?" (33–34); "nu deies mi lef for me" (34); "Laedi moder & meiden thu stod here ful neh & seh al this sorhe vpo thi deorewurthe sune" (35); "A hwat schal i nu don? Nu min herte mai tobreke, min ehne flowen al o water. A nu is mi lefmon demd for to deien" (33).

12. While there are numerous short vernacular prayers surviving from the first half of the thirteenth century, extended affective meditations on the Passion in any vernacular are very rare. I know of only two in circulation in England during this period. One of these, which takes the form of a lament of the Virgin, is the Anglo-Norman version of the *Quis dabit* attributed to Ogier of Locedio (d. 1214); see Tanqueray, *Plaintes de la Vierge en Anglo-Français*. The other is the meditative section of the *Mirour de Seinte Eglyse*, the Anglo-Norman version of the *Speculum Ecclesiae* of Edmund of Abingdon (d. 1240). The vernacular version appears to have been composed during the first half of the thirteenth century; see Edmund of Abingdon, *Mirour de Seinte Eglyse*, ed. Wilshire.

13. "Nu min herte mai tobreke" (33); "Mi bodi henge with thi bodi, neiled o rode, sperred, querfaste with inne fowr wahes; & henge i wile with the & neauer mare of mi rode cume til that i deie" (36).

14. See esp. Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved*; Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages*; Woolf, "The Theme of Christ the Lover-Knight"; Newman, "La mystique courtoise," in *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 137–67; Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*.

15. Thompson, *Wohunge*, xv.

16. "Ah is any ricchere then thu mi leof that rixles in heuene? Thu art kid keiser that al this werld wrahtes. For as te hali prophete Dauid cwiddes, 'Drihtines is te eorthe, and al that

hit fulles wêrld and al that trin wuneth. Heuene with the murthtes & ta unimete blisses.' Al is tin, mi sweting, and thu wilt yiue me yif I the riht luuie" (21–22).

17. "Thenne, swete Iesu, up o hwat herre mon mai I mi luue sette? Hwer mai I gentiller mon chese then the that art te kinges sune that tis world wealdes, and king and euene with thi fader, king ouer kinges lauere ouer lauertes?" (24). This line of reasoning is not unique to the *Wooing* but is also found in other writings addressed to religious women in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. See Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 32, and Bériou and D'Avray, "The Image of the Ideal Husband."

18. "A, that luuelike bodi that henges swa rewli swa blodi & swa kalde" (34); "Ah ouer alle othere things makes te luuewurthi to me tha harde atele hurtes, tha schomeliche wohe that tu tholedes for me, thi bittre pine & passiun" (27).

19. Auerbach, "Excursus: Gloria passionis," in *Literary Language and Its Public*, 67–81. Auerbach observes that the term *passio* had come to embody two originally disparate concepts, "suffering" and "creative, ecstatic love," by the twelfth century (74). The ideal attitude of the soul toward the divine had also found its most resonant image in that of the bride who yearns for and is "assailed" by the Bridegroom who suffered the Passion out of love for her (79). Dwelling on the Passion is thus a form of pleasure for the soulbride: "A most pleasant pillow, O good Jesus, is that thorny crown around thy head; a sweet bed, that wood of thy cross. In this am I born and nourished, made and remade, and on the altar of thy suffering will I gladly establish again a dwelling place for my remembrance" (Gilbert of Hoyland, *Sermones in Canticum Salomonis*, as quoted in Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public*, 73).

20. For some examples of this type, see C. Brown, *English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century*, 61–64.

21. "Thu art lufsum on leor, thu art al schene, al engles lif is ti neb to bihealden" (21).

22. Head, "The Marriages of Christina of Markyate," 75. Peter Brown's work on virgins consecrated to Christ in the late Roman world is also foundational for the project of recovering the literal senses of the term *sponsa Christi*; see "'Daughters of Jerusalem': The Ascetic Life of Women in the Fourth Century," in *The Body and Society*, 259–84, esp. 274–76.

23. Head, "Marriages," 81. For Christina's *vita*, see C. H. Talbot, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*.

24. Such scholarship has been more interested in exploring how women have formed their own communities or acted independently of men and outside of marriage. McNamara's survey of the history of nuns represents this trend. McNamara opens the book with an explicit disavowal of the term *sponsa Christi*: "'Brides of Christ,' a male concept of female spirituality, serves very effectively to anchor women to a traditional gender role, but women themselves rarely indulge in its implicit eroticism in their writings" (*Sisters in Arms*, ix).

25. See Logan, *Runaway Religious*.

26. Head, "Marriages," 78.

27. See Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Letters*, 174–77, esp. 175.

28. An edition of this text appears in Roberts, "Stephen Langton's *Sermo de virginibus*," 103–18.

29. "The Notification of the Death of Clare of Assisi," in Armstrong, *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, 129–31.

30. My use of this term derives from Judith Shklar's *Legalism*. Shklar's interest is not historical, and her definition of the term is not applicable to the medieval period in all its particulars, but her basic argument serves as a salutary reminder that "law" exists outside official sites of articulation: "One ought not to think of law as a discrete entity that is 'there,' but rather to regard it as part of a social continuum. At one end of the scale of legalistic values and institutions stand its most highly articulate and refined expressions, the courts of law and the rules they follow; at the other end is the personal morality of all those men and women who think of goodness as obedience to the rules that properly define their duties

and rights. Within this scale there is a vast area of social beliefs and institutions, both more and less rigid and explicit, which in varying degrees depend upon the legalistic ethos" (3).

31. See esp. Winroth, *The Making of Gratian's Decretum*.

32. See esp. Barrington and Steiner, *The Letter of the Law*; Green, "Medieval Literature and Law;" and H. A. Kelly, *Love and Marriage in the Age of Chaucer*, esp. "The Witness of Literature." Bruce Holsinger advances the useful term *vernacular legality*, defining it "provisionally" as "the self-conscious use of a medieval vernacular in order to explore a specialized realm of authoritative legal knowledge and practice whose documentary and discursive apparatus is confined primarily to Latin" ("Vernacular Legality," 157). Based as it is on a linguistic distinction, this definition does not quite capture the ways in which I see legality embedded and elaborated not only in vernacular but also in Latin texts written for, by, or about religious women. Latin in this context can be just as exploratory, experimental, and expressive of the legal thinking of "amateurs" as vernacular writings.

33. My discussion of the rites is based primarily on René Metz's *La consécration des vierges*. In his detailed history, Metz's aim is to describe the evolution of the rite; he does not set out to prove whether or not consecration rites forged a legal marriage to Christ.

34. Metz, *La consécration des vierges*, 187 ff.

35. *Ibid.*, 208, 211.

36. Molin and Mutembe, *Le rituel du mariage en France*, 159–66, 237–38; Metz, *La consécration des vierges*, 206–12, 409.

37. On the ambiguity of the terms *desponsatio* and *sponsalia*, which can refer either to a betrothal or to a marriage ceremony, see Gaudemet, *Le mariage en occident*, 60–61, and Head, "Marriages," 89.

38. Metz, *La consécration des vierges*, 211.

39. *Ibid.*, 204.

40. *Ibid.*, 265–66.

41. The virgins are provided with *paranimphae* or *magistrae* (forerunners of modern bridesmaids or matrons of honor), for instance. At the outset of the rite, an archpriest presents the virgins to the bishop, asking that he deign "to bless and consecrate and betrothe [*desponsare*]" the women to Christ (Andrieu, *Le Pontifical romain*, vol. 3, 412).

42. *Ibid.*, 414.

43. *Ibid.*, 419.

44. Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation*, 34–35.

45. See *MED* *willen* (v. 2).

46. R. H. Helmholz provides a succinct summary of these developments in *Marriage Litigation*, 26–27.

47. On the unconsummated marriage as an ideal, with the marriage between the Virgin and Joseph as its chief exemplar, see Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*.

48. Metz traces the custom of wearing wedding crowns (often made of flowers) to ancient Roman rites. Because crowns were considered a pagan vestige by many Christian moralists, they do not usually appear in wedding rites after the eleventh century. William Durand, however, includes a benediction of the crowns in his late-thirteenth-century rite for the consecration of virgins. See Metz, *La consécration des vierges*, 408–9, esp. note 120, and 294–95. See also Molin and Mutembe, *Le rituel du mariage en France*, 237–38.

49. Gertrude of Helfta, *Oeuvres Spirituelles*, 114.

50. See McDannell and Lang, *Heaven*, and Bynum, *Resurrection*, 227–343.

51. To assume that "rewards" of any kind are incompatible with true love would be to impose an ahistorical understanding on medieval emotion. As C. Stephen Jaeger puts it, in a different context, "At a king's court love and devotion are never, or hardly ever, separable from ambition and material rewards. Still, there was a mode of loving that flourished in the presence of concentrated authority, power, or divine force, a love that was or could be heartfelt even when mixed with awe or terror or conniving ambition. Everyone who observed or reflected on it (like Aristotle, Cicero, Ambrose of Milan, Aelred of Rievaulx, and

Peter of Blois) saw the dangers of love masking ambition, but none of them imagined that the genuine love of exceptional men was diminished in its value when its by-product was material gain or advancement of a career" (*Ennobling Love*, 4).

52. "Clare's Second Letter to Agnes of Prague," in Mueller, *Clare's Letters to Agnes*, 59, 55.

53. Savage and Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 242.

54. On this form of marriage, see Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*.

55. Colleen McDannell and Bernard Lang, for example, interpret passages from Mechthild and Gertrude this way in *Heaven: A History*, 101–6. They quickly assert, however, that the "consummation of the soul's desire has nothing to do with illicit erotic contact—a blasphemous thought" (102). Rather, Mechthild and Gertrude are simply alluding to the conventions of courtly love, conventions that they define, interestingly, as "kissing, embracing, and judicious contact in the nude" (102).

56. I take this concise summary of Bourdieu's concept from Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu*, 85. Typically, the imagery of "climbing" in these texts has been assumed to partake in a discourse of mystical ascent or of striving toward perfection or salvation. I do not deny that these meanings are present; rather, I am illuminating an additional meaning.

57. "The Letter of Brother Bonaventure," in Armstrong, *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, 341. That the wedding mentioned here applies specifically to female religious is signaled by Bonaventure's opening statement, where he refers to the nuns as spouses of Christ: "Dear daughters in the Lord, I have recently learned from Brother Leo, once a companion of our holy Father, how eager you are, as spouses of the eternal King, to serve the poor crucified Christ in total purity" (340).

58. Jean Gaudemet introduces this phrase in his discussion of marriage in antiquity, but it applies to the medieval period as well; see *Le mariage en occident*, esp. 27–29.

59. "I wile for ahte lefmom chese"; "me likes stalewurthe lefmom" (21, 24).

60. "Halde I wile tha to the mi leof for the self luue theseluen, and for thi luue leten alle othere things that min herte fram thi luue mihte drahe and turnen" (22); "luue I wile the Iesu Crist largest ouer othere" (22); "luue I wile the Iesu strongest ouer alle" (24); "Luue I wile the tha swete Iesu as te gentileste lif that eauer liuede on eorthe" (25).

61. "For thi, swete Iesu Crist, wile I beo poure for the, as tu was for the luue of me" (30).

62. "Othere largemen giuen thise uttre things, but thu swete Iesu for me gef theseluen, that tin ahne heorte blod ne cuthes tu with halde. Derre druri ne gef neuwer na lefmom to other" (22).

63. In thirteenth-century England, a dowry did not refer strictly to the bride's contribution to the marriage; it was used to refer to the husband's contribution as well. Diane Owen Hughes traces the evolution of the dowry in her article "From Brideprice to Dowry in Mediterranean Europe."

64. "Lauerd hwat mai i yelde the for al that tu haues yiuen me. Hwat mai thole for the for al that tu tholdes for me? Ah me bihoueth that tu beo eath to paie. A wrecche bodi & a wac bere ich ouer eorthe, & tat swuch as hit is haue yiuen & yiue wile to thi seruise" (36).

65. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

66. Metz, *La consécration des vierges*, 208, 211.

67. For the history of virginity, see esp. Bugge, *Virginitas*, and K. Kelly, *Performing Virginity*.

68. See Elkins, *Holy Women*, esp. Chap. 1, "Nun or Refugee?" The image of the false or questionable *sponsa Christi* became a stock figure of satire from the twelfth century on; on this tradition, see Daichman, *Wayward Nuns*.

69. "Forthi, eadi meiden, Godes sunes spuse, ne beo thu nawt to trusti ane to thi meidhad withuten other god"; Millett, *Hali Meidhad*, 22.

70. "Streche thi luue to Iesu Crist, thu hauest him iwunnen" (Millett, *Ancrene Wisse*, 153).

71. For the Latin version of the *Book of Ghostly Grace*, see Mechthild of Hackeborn, *Liber specialis graciae*. For the Middle English version, see *The Booke of Gostlye Grace*, ed. Halligan. The Latin translation of Mechthild of Magdeburg's *Flowing Light of the Godhead*, originally

written in low German (now lost), has been edited by the Solesmes Monks as *Lux divinitatis in Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildianae*, 437–70. For a modern English translation, see Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg*, ed. Menzies.

72. *Exercitium desponsationis et consecrationis*; this is the Third Exercise in the *Spiritual Exercises*. Unless otherwise indicated, all English citations are from Gertrude of Helfta's *The Exercises*, trans. by a Benedictine Nun of Regina Laudis. Latin citations, which I include because the precise wording is especially important in this text, are from Gertrude of Helfta's *Oeuvres spirituelles*, ed. Hourlier and Schmitt.

73. *Exercises*, 33; “Hoc modo celebrabis spirituale matrimonium, connubium amoris, desponsationem et copulationem animae tuae castae, cum Iesu sponso coelesti, inseparabili dilectionis vinculo” (*Oeuvres spirituelles*, 92).

74. *Exercises*, 34; “Quaecumque igitur voluerit me diligere, hanc volo me desponsare, ipsamque diligere et vehementer amare.... Dilecta columba mea, si mea esse velis, necesse est ut me dulciter, sapienter et fortiter diligas” (*Oeuvres spirituelles*, 94). Note that Christ expresses his will in the present rather than the future tense here.

75. *Exercises*, 43; “Tibi scrutatori pectorum non corpore placitura, sed mente, transeam in numerum sapientium puellarum, ut coelestem sponsum accensa lampade, cum oleo praeparationis expectem” (*Oeuvres spirituelles*, 112).

76. *Exercises*, 38, 40, 40–41. The corresponding Latin phrases are “cor meum cum Iesu couni in perpetuum”; “tibi inseparabiliter adhaerere”; “amor tuus cor meum transponat in te, ut glutino inseparabili adhaeream” (*Oeuvres spirituelles*, 102, 106).

77. On the relation between the languages of love poetry and law, see Clanchy, “Law and Love,” and Goodrich, *Law in the Courts of Love*.

78. *Exercises*, 45; “Foedus quod tu iniisti mecum, a me transferat cor meum, ut iam non ultra sit mecum, sed amore individuo cohabitet tecum” (*Oeuvres spirituelles*, 116). Elsewhere she writes of the *sacramentalis matrimonii foedere*, “compact of sacramental marriage” (114).

79. *Oeuvres spirituelles*, 104, 122.

80. *Exercises*, 37; *Oeuvres spirituelles*, 100.

81. The foundational study of this concept is in John T. Noonan, Jr., “Marital Affection in the Canonists.” Subsequent parenthetical citations refer to Noonan's article. Michael Sheehan confirms Noonan's findings on the importance of the concept in Gratian and the decretals in “*Maritalis affectio* Revisited.” Sheehan also calls attention to various sources not mentioned by Noonan—particularly marriage sermons, which appear to reveal that the internal, emotional quality of the marriage bond was a significant concern from the twelfth century on. See also Kooper, “Loving the Unequal Equal,” and Pedersen, “*Maritalis affectio*.”

82. Gratian ultimately concluded, as we have seen, that consent was not enough to make a marriage; consummation was necessary. It is possible that this and other contradictions can be explained by the dual authorship of the *Decretum*; Anders Winroth has presented persuasive evidence that there were “two Gratians” (*The Making of Gratian's Decretum*). For practical purposes, I follow Winroth's lead here in referring simply to “Gratian.”

83. Gratian considered this a true marriage because of the union of *affectus* between the two spouses; C. 37, q. 2, d.p.c. 39 (Friedberg, *Corpus iuris canonici* 1:1074). Here, Gratian describes the union as one of the mind: the couple is married *individuae mentis affectu*, by affection of undivided mind. Gratian does not seem to be making a distinction between mind and heart here. Rather, he is echoing Augustine's earlier use of the term *mind* in what became the classic pronouncement on the marriage of the Virgin and Joseph: “They were married in the mind and not in the flesh, and in this way they were parents” (Augustine, *De bono coniugali*; qtd. in Noonan, “Marital Affection,” 495, n. 51; see Gratian, C. 37, q. 2, c. 9, the canon *Coniunx* [Friedberg, *Corpus iuris canonici* 1:1,064]).

84. The context in which this duty becomes most clear is in a formula created for use when the Church ordered estranged spouses to be reunited. Alexander ordered that in such cases the local Church authority was to compel the husband “to return to his wife and to treat her with marital affection,” or to compel a wayward wife to return to her husband and

“serve the said husband with conjugal affection” (Noonan, “Marital Affection,” 501). In adjudicating the case of a husband who had abandoned his wife, for instance, Alexander III writes that a recalcitrant man is to be told “to put aside objection and receive the said Marietta and to strive to love her as his wife and to treat her with marital affection” (Noonan, “Marital Affection,” 502).

85. In fact the difficulty of proving marital affection seemed such an obstacle that Gratian ultimately contradicted himself: although, as we have seen, he held that a marriage need not be solemnized through public declarations and ritual, he finally asserted that this public aspect was indeed necessary as external testament to the validity of any union (Noonan, “Marital Affection,” 498–99).

86. As Pedersen shows, however, records from fourteenth-century York suggest that the phrase was a familiar one to at least some litigants in marriage disputes; see Pedersen, “*Maritalis affectio*.”

87. Gertrude, *Exercises*, 43.

88. Noonan, “Marital Affection,” 503.

89. *Ibid.*

90. Adam de Perseigne, *Lettres I*, 108, as cited in Fleming, *An Introduction to Franciscan Literature*, 252.

91. *Ibid.* On the topos of the cross as bed, see Lerchner, *Lectulus floridus*.

92. See esp. the “Versified Legend of the Virgin Clare of Assisi (1254–55)” in Armstrong, *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, 186–237.

93. See, for instance, Cheyette and Chickering, “Love, Anger, and Peace,” and the essays collected in Rosenwein, *Anger’s Past*.

94. “The Versified Legend,” Armstrong, *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, 186–237, esp. 202–4, 206–7, 212–15.

95. Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of God’s Loving-Kindness*, 134. I would like to thank Alexandra Barratt for calling this passage to my attention.

96. This is the context in which I interpret the *Ancrene Wisse*’s definition of the “true anchoress” as one whose “joy” is “to be hung, painfully and shamefully, with Jesus on his cross” (Savage and Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 178). The *Oreisun*’s image not simply of meriting heaven but also of meriting the embraces of Christ seems to place the pain/gain formula in the context of marriage making: “And does anyone believe that they will be embraced between those joyful arms in heaven, unless here they first throw themselves between your pitiful arms on the cross? No, surely, no, let no one ever believe it. Through this low embracing one must come to the high; whoever wants to embrace you there, in the form you take there, Lord of light, must first embrace you here, in the form you made yourself here, a wretch for us wretches. That is to say, whoever wants to have a part with you in your joy must share with you in your pain on earth” (Savage and Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 323; cf. *Oreisun*, in Thompson, *Wohunge* 6–7).

97. The crowns the virgins desire, for example, are not defined as crowns of martyrdom but as the “maiden’s crowns” worn by Christ’s brides in heaven: “I see Jesus Christ, who calls and awaits me, who is my Lord and my love, my life and my lover, my joy and my spouse, my happiness and my reward and maiden’s crown” (*St. Katherine*, in Savage and Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 282).

98. Savage and Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 308–9.

99. *Ibid.*, 283. Katherine’s words are cited from the paradigmatic story of marriage to Christ, the *passio* of St. Agnes, which is also quoted in rites for the consecration of virgins.

100. *Ibid.*, 243.

101. “A.... Nu min herte mai tobreke, min ehne flowen al o watter. A nu is mi lefmon demd for to deien.... A, hu liue i for reowthe?” (33–34).

102. “A, swete iesu.... With wrange schuldi the min heorte wearnen sithen that tu bohtes herte for herte.... Hwat mai thole for the for al that tu tholedes for me? Mi bodi henge with thi bodi neiled o rode, sperred querfaste with inne fowr wahes” (35–36).

103. See Weiss, "The Wooing Woman in Anglo-Norman Romance," and Allen, ed., *King Horn*.

104. Peters and Morgan, *Strongholds and Sanctuaries*, 9.

105. On the history and politics of the Marches, see R. R. Davies's *Lordship and Society*. His comments on the "jigsaw of jurisdiction in the March" (155) are especially apt; see Chapter 7, "Judicial Lordship," pp. 149–75. Davies is not concerned with marriage law or jurisdictional disputes between secular and ecclesiastical authorities, but his more general observations present a picture of legal systems characterized by tension, instability, and flux: "The complexity of the law of the March—it can be construed either as richness of variety or as disorderliness—lay in the fact that it was a plural law, drawing on two (at least) legal traditions and catering for two peoples" (162). As Davies shows, the stabilizing force in this unstable situation was often the power of individual lords.

106. E. J. Dobson (*Origins of Ancrene Wisse*) and others have based this conclusion primarily on evidence internal to the *Ancrene Wisse*.

107. Dobson, *Origins*, 114–73.

108. "Nu mi swete iesu, leaued haue i for thi luue flesches sibnesse & yette borne brethre hauen me forwurpen" (26).

109. Evidence that these legal exceptions and irregularities extended to marriage can be gleaned from R. H. Hilton's study, *A Medieval Society*. Indeed, the legal reach of the king himself could extend into these lands in irregular ways. Hilton mentions in passing that when the king's escheators made inquisitions postmortem of tenants-in-chief of the crown, it was asserted that the king had the right to "the disposal of her marriage in the case of a female heir" (*A Medieval Society*, 43). The casualness of this assumption that a daughter's consent would be irrelevant—that ecclesiastical law need not, in practice, be honored—is a striking reminder of the gaps between legal theory and practice at the highest levels of society, where marriage is above all a political institution. Peters cites numerous examples of intermarriage between Welsh and English for the purpose of political stabilization; King John and King Edward I each gave a daughter to a powerful Welsh lord, for instance (*Strongholds and Sanctuaries*, 25–31). See also Davies, "The Status of Women," 93–114.

110. It is worth recalling here the well-known instance of Dante's Piccarda, who not only laments her own fate but also that of Constance, who was taken forcibly from the convent to marry Henry, son of emperor Frederick Barbarossa. In Piccarda's words, "Uomini poi, a mal più ch'a bene usi, / fuor mi rapiron de la dolce chiostra: Iddio si sa qual poi mia vita fusi" (Then men, more used to evil than to good, snatched me from the sweet cloister: and God knows what then my life became) (Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, canto III, 32–33).

111. Cannon, *The Grounds of English Literature*; see esp. Chap. 5, "The Place of the Self: *Ancrene Wisse* and the *Katherine*-group." Cannon's account resonates with the characterization of the Marches by Davies: "particularism here reigned supreme"—a trait Davies links to geography; a "geography of particularism was strongly reinforced by a native Welsh tradition of the fragmentation of authority" (*Lordship and Society*, 231).

112. Savage and Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 243.

113. Hamburger, *Rothschild Canticles*, 48.

114. *Ibid.*, 49.

CHAPTER 2. THE GENEALOGY OF A GENRE

1. Mâle, *Religious Art in France*, 82.

2. This last phrase is J. A. W. Bennett's (*Poetry of the Passion*, 32), but the concept is most fully and critically analyzed by William Reddy, whose study of sentiment and the French Revolution exemplifies the turn to diachronic investigations in the history of emotion (*The Navigation of Feeling*). Barbara Rosenwein ("Worrying About Emotions in History" and *Emotional Communities*) has rigorously critiqued the influential diachronic study of Norbert

Elias (*The Civilizing Process*), while gesturing toward the promise that diachronic study itself holds.

3. Eamon Duffy's characterization is typical: "In England as elsewhere the Bernardine tradition of affective meditation on the passion, enriched and extended by the Franciscans, had become without any rival the central devotional activity of all seriously minded Christians.... Behind such affective devotion was a Christology which traced itself back at least to St. Anselm" (*The Stripping of the Altars*, 234–35).

4. Nicholas Watson, for example, frames the narrative as a story and asks, "How well does this narrative stand up to analysis?" ("The Middle English Mystics," 545–46).

5. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, 32. On early medieval myths of women as founders and subsequent efforts in literary texts "to eliminate or circumscribe the place of women as foundational and thus as exemplary figures in constructed narratives of origins," see Geary, *Women at the Beginning*, 5.

6. These leads include R. W. Southern's comment that it "was this conjunction of monastic piety and the religious impulses of great ladies which chiefly fashioned the private devotions of the Middle Ages" (*Saint Anselm and His Biographer*, 37) and Douglas Gray's parenthetical remark that "it is remarkable how important a part women play in the 'devotional movement'" (*Themes and Images*, 26). Although his focus is on medieval literacy and reading practices rather than on the origins of affective meditation, Michael Clanchy, in the second edition of *From Memory to Written Record*, provides evidence that some of the earliest surviving prayer books in England circulated chiefly among female religious and aristocratic women (pp. 111, 191–96, 251–52).

7. Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion*, 168. I engage more fully with Fulton's views on gender below. Here, I would simply observe that gender itself is a fundamental way of structuring social and power relations (as well as the *habitus* of individuals), and for this reason it is a mistake to believe that history can be understood without reference to its force. For an eloquent statement of the issues at stake in the analysis of gender in the practice of medieval history, see Judith Bennett, *History Matters*.

8. On the way the study of origins can easily become mere projection or serve as a vehicle for the promotion of ideologies, see esp. Bloch, "The Idol of Origins," in *The Historian's Craft*, and Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*.

9. In asking this question, my work is aligned with important recent work on women and patterns of readership and patronage; see esp. McCash, *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*; Ferrante, *To the Glory of Her Sex*, and Hamburger, "Before the Book of Hours," in *The Visual and the Visionary*. For the later Middle Ages, key studies include those by Susan Groag Bell, "Medieval Women Book Owners"; David Bell's bibliographical work, *What Nuns Read*; Smith and Taylor, *Women and the Book*; Gill, "Women and the Production of Religious Literature"; and Erler, *Women, Reading, and Piety*.

10. For editions and translations of the texts listed here, see the entries in the bibliography for John of Fécamp, *Libellus*; Anselm of Canterbury, *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Prayers and Meditations*; Goscelin of St. Bertin, *The Book of Encouragement*; Aelred of Rievaulx, *La vie de recluse and Rule of Life for a Recluse*; Edmund of Abingdon, *Mirour de Seinte Eglyse*; Ogier of Locedio, "Quis dabit capiti meo"; Thompson, *The Wohunge of Ure Lauerd*; Savage and Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*; Bonaventure, *De perfectione vitae ad sorores and On the Perfection of Life, Addressed to Sisters*; Seuse, *Das Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit and Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*; Rolle, *Richard Rolle: Prose and Verse and The English Writings*; Stallings-Taney, *Iohannis de Caulibus: Meditationes Vite Christi*; and Taney et al., *Meditations on the Life of Christ*.

11. Like the *Ego Dormio*, Rolle's *Form of Living* is an epistle rather than a meditative text; but in it Rolle assumes that affective meditation on the Passion is central to the devotional practices of his original reader, Margaret Kirkby, and he encourages her to persist in this practice. The authorship of the texts known as *Meditation A* and *Meditation B* (Text I and Text II) is unclear, but the evidence suggests that while Text II of *Meditation B* was not—at

least in his final form—composed by Rolle, *Meditation A* and Text I of *Meditation B* are likely to have been his. For further discussion of the evidence for authorship, see [Chapter 4](#).

12. For the date of the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, see McNamer, “Further Evidence for the Date of the Pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes*.” This date has been accepted by the editor of the critical edition of the MVC; see Stallings-Taney, “Introduction,” *Iohannes de Caulibus: Meditationes vite Christi*.

13. Foucault’s questions have provoked much of the work in the past few decades that has called into question the assumption that it is solely authors who “author” a text: “Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?” (“What Is an Author?” 462). McGann has argued that just as authority is “a social nexus, not a personal possession,” so too is authorship a socially contingent role, one largely governed by audience expectation and response (*A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*, 48). For the study of medieval genres, the work of Aron Gurevich on “popular” literature is especially important. Writing on sermons, legends of the saints, and miracle stories, Gurevich states: “Here is an ecclesiastical literature which, because it is directed to the illiterate mass of simple people, and therefore oriented towards their minds, is in turn strongly influenced by them. Intentionally or not, these texts are ‘infected’ by folklore. As a matter of fact, the efficacy of this type of literature depended on the degree to which the authors were able to enter into the thought-structure of their audience” (*Medieval Popular Culture*, 5).

14. Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 3–45, 19.

15. *Ibid.*, 19.

16. Jauss formulates this concept in “Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature,” in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 76–109.

17. *Ibid.*, 90–91.

18. See esp. Biddick, “Genders, Bodies, Borders”; Aers and Staley, *Powers of the Holy*; Bestul, *Texts of the Passion*; Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers*; Wogan-Browne, *Saints’ Lives and Women’s Literary Culture*; and Berlant, *Compassion*.

19. A reading text in English can be pieced together by extracting chapters 12–25, 27–33, and 35–37 from Matthew O’Connell, trans., *Meditations of Saint Augustine*; this corresponds to the same chapters in the Latin *Liber meditationum* of pseudo-Augustine, *PL* 40, cols. 901–42.

20. Bernard McGinn, for instance, notes the “strongly christological” character of the fourth prayer, as well as the way it combines a focus on the Passion with language from the *Song of Songs* (*The Growth of Mysticism*, 137); Fulton calls it “stunning” and gives the richest explication of it to date (*From Judgment to Passion*, 169).

21. O’Connell, *Meditations*, 114–15; *PL*, cols. 935–36.

22. For texts of the *Confessio theologica*, *Lamentatio*, several letters, and two devotional poems, see Leclercq and Bonnes, *Un maître de la vie spirituelle*. The authenticity of the *Confessio fidei*, which consists of an extract from the *Confessio theologica* and lengthy passages of speculative theology, has been debated; see Hurlbut, *Picture of the Heavenly Jerusalem*.

23. Wilmart, “Deux préfaces spirituelles” and *Auteurs spirituels*, 126–37; in the latter, Wilmart describes John as “the most remarkable spiritual author of the Middle Ages before St. Bernard” (127).

24. “Deux préfaces,” 25, n. 11.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Leclercq and Bonnes, *Un maître de la vie spirituelle*, “L’oeuvre de Jean de Fécamp est étroitement liée à sa vie personnelle” (28); “les effusions intimes de cet abbé” (28).

27. *Ibid.*

28. This assumption that the “I” of John’s prayers is in the first instance self-expressive (and only secondarily made available to other readers) retains currency. Fulton, writing in 2003, regularly conflates the speaking voice of the *Confessio theologica* and the *Libellus* with

the voice of John himself; see, for example, 164, 166, and 521, n. 102 (Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion*). McGinn, writing in 1999, also conflates voice with author, as when he writes that “John begs for the ‘wound of love’” in the fourth prayer of the *Libellus* (*The Growth of Mysticism*, 137).

29. Wilmart concludes that the letter was first composed for the unnamed nun and adapted slightly later for Agnes; see “Deux préfaces.”

30. “Dudum quidem, domina imperatrix, tibi petere placuit, ut ex scripturis colligerem luculentos breuesque sermones, in quibus iuxta legem ordinis tui absque graui labore discere posses normam bene uiuendi. Omnis enim gradus, aetas, et sexus ad informationem uitae suae in sacris litteris propriam habet doctrinam, ut unusquisque, in uocatione qua uocatus est rectissime ambulans, peruenire ualeat ad regnum in quo multae sunt mansiones” (Leclercq and Bonnes, *Un maître de la vie spirituelle*, 211–12). It seems significant to me that the words “domina imperatrix” dominate the manuscript page in Metz, Bibliothèque Municipale MS 245.

31. See Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion*, 166–68. Fulton’s argument in pp. 166–68 is structured as a response to my earlier argument about the formative role of women readers in the making of the *Libellus* and in the origins of affective meditation more generally (McNamer, “Reading the Literature of Compassion: A Study in the History of Feeling,” University of California, Los Angeles, Ph.D. dissertation, [Chapter 2](#)).

32. Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion*, 167.

33. *Ibid.*, 166.

34. *Ibid.*, 240–41.

35. The classic essay by Leo Spitzer, “Note on the Poetic and the Empirical ‘I’ in Medieval Authors,” does not address the genre of affective meditation directly, but Spitzer’s approach—one he calls “historical semantics”—influences my treatment of the topic here. A very straightforward exposition of the function of “I” in religious vernacular lyric is given by Rosemary Woolf in her introduction to *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages*. Drawing a contrast between medieval English devotional poets and their seventeenth-century counterparts, Woolf writes of an “abnegation of individuality” on the part of the former: “The writers of both draw upon the contemporary methods of meditation of their respective periods, meditation on the Passion and, to a lesser extent, meditation on death. But, whereas the seventeenth-century poets show the poet meditating, the medieval writers provide versified meditations which others may use: in the one the meditator is the poet; in the other the meditator is the reader” (*English Religious Lyric*, 6). It is perhaps because the topic of Woolf’s book is late-medieval vernacular lyric rather than earlier Latin meditations that her comments have not been drawn into discussions of the origins of the genre.

36. Reliable sources for John’s life are relatively abundant. (I am excluding here as “unreliable” the devotional works themselves, from which his life has been read.) There is no detailed study of John’s life. But it is known that he was born around the year 990 in Ravenna, at that time a place of great intellectual ferment, and seems to have acquired training in the emerging disciplines of medicine and law in addition to the traditional curriculum. He became active in the reform movement as an aid to the energetic William of Volpiano, following him to northern France and, when William assumed the abbacy of La Trinité in Fécamp, serving as prior there until William, in declining health, handed the abbacy over to him in 1028. For the next fifty years, John served as a supremely capable administrator and diplomat (it was his visit to Edward the Confessor in 1054, for instance, that appears to have secured for Fécamp possession of the lands along the Sussex coast that were to provide the most strategic foothold for the Normans before 1066). He died in 1078. Primary documents relating to John’s life are listed in Wilmart, Leclercq and Bonnes, and Hurlbut, and in the essays collected in *L’abbaye bénédictine de Fécamp*, especially Chibnall, “Fécamp and England,” and Musset, “La vie économique de l’abbaye de Fécamp.”

37. For the circulation of manuscripts during this period, see Webber, “The Diffusion of Augustine’s *Confessions*,” and sources cited therein.

38. Jay Rubenstein introduces this helpful term and gives a succinct synopsis of the beginnings of medieval autobiography in “Biography and Autobiography.” For Abelard, see esp. Dronke, *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages*, and for the classic thesis of the “discovery of the individual” (an idea still debated), see Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual*, 79–86.

39. The history of writing as a technology also strongly suggests that John’s writings are unlikely to be self-expressive or made for his own use. Writing in the eleventh century was a labor-intensive activity, one whose chief purposes were to preserve what could not be trusted to memory, to give words a fixity they could not attain in oral discourse, or to communicate to a distant audience (on this period, see esp. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*). But it is highly likely that John, like other monks of his time, had perfected the art of memory; his compositions themselves—replete with passages from the psalms, scriptures, Augustine, and the writings of the church fathers, produced in fragments suggestive of remembered form—stand as witness to this. On memory and its relation to medieval composition, see Carruthers, *The Book of Memory* and *The Craft of Thought*. The other potential explanation—that John would wish to write down his prolix meditations so he could repeat them in exactly the same way again—makes little sense: written prayers in the eleventh century seem to have served as a basis for improvisation in performances that were, to put it in musical terms, more like jazz than a symphony. Fixity and fidelity to the words on the page do not appear to have had the kind of value they would have in later eras. Even Anselm, whose prayers have so often been praised for their balance and precision—for the beauty of their fixity—says as much in the letter he appended to the collection for Matilda of Tuscany (“ut si cui placuerint de hoc exemplari eas possit accipere”).

40. Southern, *Saint Anselm and His Biographer*, 38, 47; “Foreword,” 10.

41. Anselm, *Prayers and Meditations*, 95.

42. *Ibid.*, 96.

43. *Ibid.*, 106.

44. Anselm, *Letters*, I: 92. For a study of Anselm’s *Letters* and the witness they bear to the important influence of women in his life, see Vaughn, *St. Anselm and the Handmaidens of God*.

45. Pächt, “The Illustrations of St. Anselm’s *Prayers*,” reproduces the manuscript’s images and makes the case for Admont 289’s derivation from Matilda’s exemplar. The provenance and early use of Admont 289 is discussed in Shepard, “Conventual Use of St. Anselm’s *Prayers and Meditations*.”

46. Compare the Penguin paperback edition of *Prayers and Meditations*, trans. Ward, whose cover illustration features only Anselm.

47. The earliest manuscript witness for the *Confessio* is Metz, Bibliothèque Municipale MS 245. In this manuscript, which Wilmart has dated to the late eleventh century (ca. 1080), it is preceded by the *Libellus*.

48. Leclercq and Bonnes, *Un maître de la vie spirituelle*, 133.

49. Wilmart, *Auteurs spirituels*, 135, and “Deux préfaces,” 43–44. This reasoning is adopted without challenge by Leclercq and Bonnes, *Un maître de la vie spirituelle*; by Hurlbut, *Picture of the Heavenly Jerusalem*, vi, 16; and by Philippe de Vial in his introduction to John of Fécamp, *La confession théologique*. Fulton also assumes that this phrase is uttered in John’s own voice (“John asks the Lord to be present ‘ut famulum tuum abbatem meum’”) and describes this prayer for “my abbot” as a “relatively clear indication that he was writing prior to his elevation to the abbacy (1028) but while already a monk” (*From Judgment to Passion*, 521, n. 102).

50. Wilmart, Leclercq and Bonnes, and Fulton each note this fact, but they do not register its implications.

51. de Vial, introduction to John of Fécamp, *La confession théologique*, 15.

52. Stephen Hurlbut notes the title of this printed version—“Confessio theologica, tribus partibus absoluta. Parisiis: Apud M. Vascovanum, 1539, cum privilegio”—and describes the

surviving fragment of the manuscript from which the text was printed, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS lat 3088, which lacks a title in its present condition (*Picture of the Heavenly Jerusalem*, vi, 13). The title of the *Confessio fidei*, too, is a later title for a work that incorporates much of the *Confessio theologica* but may not have been composed by John.

53. In Metz Bibliothèque Municipale MS 245, this text has no title but is called simply an edited version (“edita est”) of the *Libellus*, which precedes it in the manuscript. The full rubric reads: “Lege et istam aliam orationem quae simili modo de divina contemplatione edita est. Nam multa repperientur in ista quae in illa superiore non sunt” (fol. 38r). The manuscript used by Leclercq and Bonnes as the basis for their edition, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS lat 1919, has the title “Incipit liber confessionum.” Leclercq and Bonnes date this manuscript to the twelfth century, but Hurlbut subsequently dated it to the thirteenth (*Picture of the Heavenly Jerusalem*, v, 17). The Metz manuscript was not available to Leclercq and Bonnes when they were preparing their edition.

54. As Leclercq and Bonnes observe, John often cites the parable of the Good Shepherd who looks after his sheep in his pastoral letters generally; and he signs his letter to Agnes, “ego Iohannes, ultimus servorum Christi” (Leclercq and Bonnes, *Un maître de la vie spirituelle*, 217). To dismiss his protestations of service to the former empress as mere humility *topoi* would be to miss, I think, the interesting power dynamics operating around such words at this time. Whatever the relation between male confessors and female religious would later become, it is clear that the aristocratic women for whom John wrote had real, worldly power, and he served at their pleasure. The same was true with his near contemporaries, Anselm and Matilda, and Goscelin and the women of Wilton. On Anselm and his female correspondents, see Vaughn, *St. Anselm and the Handmaidens of God*, and on Wilton, Hollis, ed., *Writing the Wilton Women*.

55. Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric*, 1–15, esp. 5. One could say, in fact, that John’s writings were never “lost” at all and that Wilmart’s “discovery” of them and of the man has more to do with modern needs to locate named authors than it has to do with medieval modes of thinking about writing.

56. Compare, however, the exemplary force that Anselm’s prayers clearly had for Durandus, Abbot of Casa-Dei: “When we read these words, your pious tears were before us, drawing the same from us” (Anselm, *Prayers and Meditations*, 220). In the earliest illuminated copies of the *Prayers and Meditations*, however, a female figure functions as the exemplary meditant; see Pächt, “The Illustrations of St. Anselm’s *Prayers and Meditations*.”

57. I am bracketing here the complex question of what “the law” or “legal marriage” was understood to be before the intense theorizing and codifications by Gratian and others in the twelfth century. But whatever the case, it can be assumed that John of Fécamp, a northern Italian by birth, an active participant in the reform movement, and a hardheaded administrator for the fifty years of his directorship of one of the most wealthy and powerful abbeys in Normandy, would have been no stranger to legal thinking. Nor would Agnes of Poitou, as empress of the Holy Roman Empire and one whose life history was centrally defined by marriage.

58. Leclercq and Bonnes, “Lettre à une moniale,” *Un maître de la vie spirituelle*, 204–5.

59. “Les intimes faveurs de l’amour divin sont réservées aux Épouses qui meritent vraiment ce nom” (“Deux préfaces,” 7).

60. “Ad illam beatissimam peruenias uisionem, ubi palam de Patre loquitur Filius, tuus uere dilectus, qui cum Patre et Spiritu Sancto uiuit et regnat per omnia secula seculorum” (Leclercq and Bonnes, “Lettre à une moniale,” in *Un maître de la vie spirituelle*, 210).

61. “Haec est autem castae et uerae sponsae morum et studiorum compositio” (Leclercq and Bonnes, “Lettre à une moniale,” in *Un maître de la vie spirituelle*, 206).

62. “Secretis et creberrimis orationibus incumbit. Dulce est ei frequentius flere. Sacris uigilis et psalmodiae, non somnolenta, sed intenta, studet interesse.... Optimam partem semper, quantum licet sibi, cum uera Maria eligit.... Non agit quicquam perperam nec superbe; sed, sicut lilium inter spinas, sic uera sponsa inter filias. Tu quoque imitare uestigia

eius, si sponsa Verbi esse desideras” (Leclercq and Bonnes, “Lettre à une moniale,” in *Un maître de la vie spirituelle*, 206). As Leclercq and Bonnes note, many of these injunctions derive from the *Rule of St. Benedict*. Significantly, however, the final sentences in this passage (“non agit ... desideras”) do not come from the *Rule*; thus, in this context, they frame the *Rule*’s prescripts with reference to a reward that only *female* religious can obtain.

63. “Ad hoc ornamentum iugiter in te conseruandum, queso, peruigili mente accipe illud in quo delectari scio, opusculum hoc dulcissimae deflorationis meae, canticum delectabile sponso tuo et sodalibus utriusque” (Leclercq and Bonnes, “Lettre à une moniale,” in *Un maître de la vie spirituelle*, 207). This passage follows directly after the phrase, “si sponsa Verbi esse desideras” (206); this is why I take “ornamentum” to refer to the title “sponsa Verbi.”

64. This opinion is offered by Stephen Hurlbut, without further comment (*The Picture of the Heavenly Jerusalem*, V, 18). Other scholars writing on the *Libellus* have ignored the Zwettl version, privileging Metz 245 in all discussions, but this may well be because the Metz version has the great virtue of availability: it is the version printed in the *Patrologia Latina*; Zwettl is unprinted.

65. “Aurea gemma datur animae quae sponsa vocatur”; Zwettl (Austria), Zisterzienserstift MS 164, fol. 1v. This phrase is written above the opening lines of the text and in a different hand, but one that appears to date from the same period. I have let *anima* stand untranslated here and elsewhere, because for female religious it may have stood for more than *soul*, at least in the sense of that term in common usage (in which *soul* is taken to be an entity detached from the gender of the socially situated self). Its feminine form appears to me to be functional, in many texts for women; the grammatical gender bears a meaningful and not merely accidental relation to the gender of the female reader of the text.

66. Metz, *La consécration des vierges*, 208.

67. O’Connell, *Meditations*, 115; *PL*, cols. 935–36.

68. Contemporary sources expose the intensity of the pressure put on Agnes to remarry after her husband’s death. Peter Damian praises her for rejecting these “offers”: “This expert and sober inebriation also prompted you, left alone at the death of your husband when still in the flower of youth, to pay no attention to important and magnificent suitors; you did not marry again as everyone seemed to advise, but appeared as if dead to the world, so that you might overcome through Christ alone. As an experienced woman of affairs, intent on sales in the marketplace, you rejected the world that you might avoid the sentence of death; you chose poverty that you might possess an abundance of imperishable riches” (Peter Damian, *Letters*, 43). Peter is praising Agnes for her decision, but there were many who did not and aggressively sought to draw her from the convent; see Black-Veldtrup, *Kaiserin Agnes*. Black-Veldtrup lists sources for the date 1061 on p. 91.

69. See esp. Aldhelm, *On Virginity*; Anselm’s letters to Gundhilda (*The Letters of Saint Anselm of Canterbury*, vol. 2, 64–74); and K. Kelly, *Performing Virginity*.

70. “Conscientia mea terret me peius omni larua omnique imagine. Ideo fugio per sanctorum loca, quaerens latibulum a facie timoris huius, nec minimum desiderium est mihi ueniendi ad nos, de quibus comperi quia uestra intercessio certa salus est” (Wilmart, “Deux préfaces,” 29). Compare the predicament faced by aristocratic women in England after the Norman conquest, described by Sharon Elkins in her first chapter, “Nun or Refugee?,” *Holy Women of Twelfth-Century England*.

71. On Agnes’s attempts to restrain Henry in later years—as she watched him flaunt the pope’s authority, take up arms against Matilda of Tuscany, and attempt to dismiss his wife Bertha—see Black-Veldtrup, *Kaiserin Agnes*, and Blumenthal, *The Investiture Controversy*.

72. Peter Damian, *Letters*, vol. 3, no. 66. This letter and several others are addressed to “Blanche”; the scholarly consensus is that this is a pseudonym for Agnes; see Blum’s discussion in Peter Damian, *Letters*, vol. 3, no. 40. For the full text of the Latin letter, see Peter Damian, *Epistolae*, vol. 2, 248–79; subsequent parenthetical citations to the Latin refer to this edition.

73. Peter Damian, *Letters*, vol. 3, 40.
74. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 41.
75. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 42.
76. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 46. “Hunc sponsum, venerabilis soror, verae karitatis ulnis amplectere, super hoc iugiter delectare”; *Epistolae* vol. 2, 255.
77. Peter Damian, *Letters* vol. 3, 46–47. “Quisquis igitur amore continuo Christum in archano sui cordis amplectitur, quisquis imitandi gratia passionis eius misterium iugiter meditatur, huic profecto mirrae fasciculus Christus efficitur, atque iuxta scripturae sacrae sententiam inter eius ubera commoratur”; *Epistolae*, vol. 2, 255.
78. Peter Damian, *Letters*, vol. 3, 48; *Epistolae*, vol. 2, 256.
79. Peter Damian, *Letters*, vol. 3, 46, 47. Significantly, in the same letter to Agnes, Peter describes the self-flagellating, ascetic, and penitential practices for which he and other holy men of the time were known. He does not, however, advocate this kind of practice—both motivated by and productive of fear and remorse—for Agnes. He advocates affective meditation as an alternative, one incumbent upon her because of her social status as bride of Christ.
80. See esp. Oliver, “A Bundle of Myrrh.”
81. Peter Damian, *Letters*, vol. 3, 69.
82. For the persistence of this characterization of Matilda’s role from the 1950s through 2006, see Pächt, “The Illustrations of St. Anselm’s *Prayers*,” and Fulton, “Praying with Anselm at Admont.” The characterization of Goscelin is by Hollis, in *Writing the Wilton Women*, 8. Although space does not permit an extended analysis of Eve of Wilton and the *Liber confortatorius* here, both the *Liber* and the *Life of Edith* contain numerous passages that suggest that Passion meditation and the enactment of marriage were understood to be functionally linked. Indeed, the *Life of Edith* may indicate that a tradition of affective meditation on the Passion at Wilton, a tradition that the *Life* casts within a nuptial framework, may go back to the late tenth century; certainly Edith’s commissioning of a chapel painted with scenes from the Passion—a chapel that she called her wedding chamber—is suggestive. For the Wilton texts and interpretive essays, see Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*. Another fine English translation of the *Liber confortatorius* has recently been published; see Goscelin of St. Bertin, *The Book of Encouragement and Consolation*, trans. Monika Otter.
83. Blumenthal, *Investiture Controversy*.
84. Reproduced as Figure 16 in Goez and Goez, *Die Urkunden und Briefe der Markgräfin Mathilde von Tuszien*.
85. Reynolds, “Reading Matilda: The Self-Fashioning of a Duchess,” 6–7. On this seal, see Goez and Goez, *Urkunden und Briefe*, 13–15.
86. Reynolds, “Reading Matilda,” 7.
87. The most extended discussion of Matilda’s unusual signature is that by Werner Goez, “Matilda Dei gratia si quid est.”
88. Reynolds, “Reading Matilda,” 5, 7; Goez, “Matilda Dei gratia si quid est,” argues that the term reflects Matilda’s uncertainty concerning her official political position.
89. John of Mantua, *In Cantica Canticorum*, 25. The full passage reads as follows: “Quae igitur, o vere Dei sponsa, dilectum cognoscere multipliciter quaesisti, et cuius dilectione civitatem circuisti et per vicos quaerens non satis invenisti, ad plateas idest ad acticae vitae homines coacta es redire sperans quemlibet plus te eum invenisse. Hac compulsa necessitate, illius admonita caritate ad me etiam rotam mundi non abhorrentem dignata es accedere, et dilectum tuum in puris tantum mentibus habitantem per me talis negotii satis expertem aliquo modo putas invenire. Quapropter Cantica Canticorum, qui est doctrina contemplationis, me rogasti exponere sperans aliquid a me audire, quod tuae dilectioni possit proficere” (25–26). Other relevant passages include one in which God is reminded that he is Matilda’s spouse: “Quia enim Matilda, tua gloriosa potestas, tibi, Deus, adhaesit per activam vitam et dulcedinem tui gustavit, virago prudentissima sic terruit subditos,

quod cuique licuit vivere de proprio. Ipse enim scis, Deus trinus et unus, qui eius es sponsus, quantum tibi studuit placere et quantam venenosorum pestem a domo tua fugavit rigore suae iustitiae salva tamen sua pietate. Ne te umquam pigeat, caeli sponsa, arma simul portare et uti contemplatione et tuo complere gladio contra ... pravorum haereticorum, quod sanctorum catholicorum deest verbo” (51–52) (“You know, God, *who are spouse to her*, how much she strove to please you and how much she fled to your house from poisonous pests through the rigor of your justice and the salve of your loving kindness. Lest she might displease you at any time, *the spouse of heaven* ... took up arms against the depraved heretics.”).

90. “... sponsa propter vehementiam affectionis” (ibid., 133).

91. “Per purpuram passion Christi accipitur” (ibid., 137). This appears in the context of explicating *Canticles*, vol. 7, 5, “Et comae capitis tui sicut purpura regis iuncta canalibus.”

92. “Hanc sponsam sequere in sui exercitii labore, ut in eandem cum illa hereditatem merearis pervenire, praestante hoc tibi sponso tuo Domino nostro Iesu Christo, qui cum Deo patre et spiritu sancto vivit et regnat Deus per omnia saecula saeculorum. Amen.” (John of Mantua, *In Cantica Canticorum*, 155).

93. Donizone di Canossa, *Matilde e Canossa*.

94. For these prayers, see Barré, *Prières anciennes*, 225–35, and Wilmart, “Cinq textes de prière composés par Anselme de Lucques pour la comtesse Mathilde.” Fulton discusses these prayers as important evidence of the beginnings of affective devotion without, however, concluding that Matilda’s gender was a meaningful factor in their composition (*From Judgment to Passion*, 227).

95. For Matilda’s role in producing copies of Anselm’s prayers for use by nuns, see Pächt, “The Illustrations of St. Anselm’s *Prayers*,” and Fulton, “Praying with Anselm at Admont.”

96. Dronke, “Laments of the Maries,” 111.

97. I thus wish to gesture toward the whole body of scholarship on the meaning of such prayers for men—from Southern’s work on Anselm, to Leclercq’s *Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, to Fulton’s ample and nuanced treatment of the subject in *From Judgment to Passion*—as an essential complement to this study.

98. Aelred, *Rule of Life for a Recluse*, 90.

99. See comments on Aelred as “Bernard of the North” by David Knowles preceding the English text of the *Rule of Life for a Recluse*, a translation published by Cistercian Publications; the critical edition of the Latin text also frames it as Cistercian. A. G. Rigg’s formulation is representative: Aelred “maintained the strongly emotional spirit of Bernard of Clairvaux. Especially significant for this history is a section in his rule for female recluses, *De institutione inclusarum*.... As meditation on the life of Christ becomes central to religious literature from the thirteenth to the fourteenth century, Aelred’s influence must be regarded as one of the most important on Anglo-Latin literature” (Rigg, *A History of Anglo-Latin Literature*, 61).

100. Aelred could not have found a great deal of precedent in Bernard’s writings, as far as I have been able to determine. Although I am open to correction on this point, it seems to me that Bernard’s association with meditation on the Passion, as distinct from his quite general advocacy of meditation on Christ’s humanity as the first stage in contemplative practice (Sermon 20, *On the Song of Songs*, ii, 147–55) has been greatly exaggerated. The scholarship on the subject seems to rest heavily on a single sermon in his exegesis of the *Song of Songs*. In Sermon 43, on the “bundle of myrrh,” Bernard advocates compassionate meditation on the Passion (*On the Song of Songs*, iv, 220–24). But most of Bernard’s writing on the humanity of Christ concerns the beauty of Christ’s body rather than its disfigurement in the Passion.

101. Aelred, *Rule of Life for a Recluse*, 42. It is possible, of course, that Aelred’s statement that he writes at the request of his sister is merely a fiction, a rhetorical formula. It is precisely this assumption that I wish to question.

1. King, *The Life of Marie d'Oignies*, 58.

2. *Ibid.*, 63. Bynum is among those who have interpreted Marie's wounds as a form of self-inflicted stigmatization, with the wounds appearing "in the form of Christ's wounds"; and as Bynum points out, virtually all stigmatics from the Middle Ages were women (*Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 119, 200–201).

3. Although any argument along these lines is speculative, it is nonetheless worth mentioning that Jacques de Vitry traveled to Umbria in 1214 and attended the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215; both journeys would have provided occasions to meet Francis and to disseminate the story of Marie, whose candidacy for sainthood Jacques wished to promote. Moreover, fascinated by the Poor Clares and the Umiliati, Jacques observed their way of life intently while he was in Italy before his appointment as bishop of Acre in 1216. In Margot King's view, Marie "exerted a major influence on Franciscan thought" and "influenced no less a person than St. Francis himself, who indeed, had actually begun a pilgrimage to the diocese of Liège in the summer of 1217 to visit these *mulieres sanctae*" (King, *The Life of Marie d'Oignies*, 5–6).

4. Although work by Vauchez, Hamburger, Bynum, Oliver, Hollis, and many others provides abundant evidence of this, such work has not been synthesized in a form that presents itself as a challenge to the dominant narrative of the history of affective devotion. Nor has a more specific study been undertaken concerning deliberate efforts by the Franciscans to adopt a form of piety widely practiced by women while occluding women as source. But evidence of such a practice clearly appears in the iconographic tradition. Where illustrations of a penitent embracing the cross had, as early as the eleventh century, typically featured a woman (Mary Magdalene or, in the case of the Weingarten Gospels, Judith of Flanders), the Franciscans displace that female image with an image of Francis or a Franciscan friar. For some of the earliest examples, see Cook, *Images of St. Francis of Assisi*.

5. In Italy, for example, Franciscan studies as a discipline is supported primarily by the Società Internazionale di Studi Francescani, which holds its annual conferences in Assisi and is affiliated with the Franciscan Order. In the United States, Franciscan studies has always been and continues to be dominated by Franciscans: sessions devoted to the topic at the annual convention of medieval studies in Kalamazoo, Michigan, for instance, are sponsored by the Franciscan Institute at St. Bonaventure University, which also publishes the primary journal for English-speaking readers, *Franciscan Studies* (for which peer review is typically conducted by Franciscans), and serves as the primary publisher in the United States for books on Francis and early Franciscan history. The English translation of Jacques Dalarun's *Francis of Assisi and the Feminine* is among the Franciscan Institute's most recent publications. This book reaffirms the assumption that Francis initiated a new current of spirituality among women: "The holy women who lived between the 13th and 14th centuries were ... part of the movement led by Francis. It cannot be denied that, regardless of the institutions to which they belonged or even if they were not affiliated to any, their spirituality reflects many elements inherited as a result of the enormous impact of the man from Assisi" (14). Studies presenting a more complex view of the influences on the Poor Clares and other holy women of the time include those by Alberzoni, *Clare of Assisi and the Poor Sisters in the Thirteenth Century*; Andenna and Vetere, *Chiara e la diffusione delle Clarisse*; the essays collected in *Movimento religioso femminile e francescanesimo*; Peterson, *Clare of Assisi*; and Wood, *Women, Art, and Spirituality*.

6. Sarah Beckwith, for instance, describes the "emphatic fetishizing of Christ's torn and bleeding body" as "Franciscanism" or "Franciscan *affectus*" (*Christ's Body*, esp. 52–55). In a source still widely used as a history of Christian Latin poetry, F.J.E. Raby speaks of pathos and the new tenderness of feeling in late medieval poetry and art as "Franciscan emotion" (*A History of Christian-Latin Poetry*, 429); in only a slight variation on the theme, Bennett describes the "new feeling for the Cross and its burden" as "Bonaventuran" (*Poetry of the Passion*, 34).

7. The characterization of affective meditation as “Franciscan” is pervasive, even in studies published as recently as 2008. Sarah Stanbury, for example, writes of a “long tradition of Franciscan visual meditation and English vernacular piety that stressed emotional and bodily imitation of Christ through meditation on his humanity” (*The Visual Object of Desire*, 172). In a widely cited article, “The Humanity and Passion of Christ,” Ewert Cousins credits Anselm, Bernard, and several other monastic writers for their innovative prayers and meditations but describes Francis as the real revolutionary: “More than any other saint or spiritual writer, he transformed religious sensibility in the direction of devotion to the humanity of Christ”; compassionate meditation on the Passion of Christ is thus a “distinctly Franciscan” development (380–81, 384). V. A. Kolve explains that “Franciscan devotional modes had revolutionized the spiritual life of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries” (*The Play Called Corpus Christi*, 4); David L. Jeffrey describes compassion-evoking realism as “Franciscan style” (*The Early English Lyric*); Clarissa Atkinson writes that Margery Kempe’s outbursts exemplify “the Franciscan ethos and pathos,” since her “religious practices and emotions were shaped (at least indirectly) by the teachings of Anselm and Bernard and activities of the Franciscans” (*Mystic and Pilgrim*), 157; Denise Despres characterizes prayer that centers on the pathetic elements of Christ’s life as “Franciscan Meditation” in a chapter with that title (*Ghostly Sights*, 19–54). David Aers cites Richard Kieckhefer’s characterization of the Bernardine-Franciscan transformation in late-medieval piety approvingly. Kieckhefer writes: “With major stimulus from the writing of Bernard of Clairvaux, and with strong support from Francis of Assisi, the humanity of Jesus became central in medieval spirituality” (*Unquiet Souls*, 90); Aers writes: “This offers a good summary of the transformation, one that has been exceptionally well documented by numerous scholars in diverse disciplines of research” (*Powers of the Holy*, 16). I list these instances not to criticize the studies as a whole, for they represent a fine tradition of scholarship, but rather to illustrate how deeply entrenched the notion is that affective meditation is “Franciscan.”

8. For the date of composition of the MVC and its implications for art history, see McNamer, “Further Evidence for the Date of the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes Vitae Christi*.” The attribution to Johannes de Caulibus of San Gimignano rests on two brief allusions in a tract composed between 1385 and 1390 by Bartholomew of Pisa. See Stallings-Taney, *Meditaciones vite Christi*, ix–xi, for a brief history of this attribution.

9. The most complete list of the manuscripts remains that of Fischer, “Die *Meditationes vitae Christi*”; additions, corrections, and further debate about the manuscript tradition have been carried out in Gasca Queirazza, “Intorno ad alcuni codici”; Petrocchi, “Sulla composizione e data delle *Meditationes vitae Christi*”; Vaccari, “Le ‘Meditazioni della vita di Cristo’ in volgare”; Stallings, *Meditaciones de passione Christi*; McNamer, “Further Evidence”; Sargent’s introduction to Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*; Stallings-Taney, *Meditaciones vite Christi*; and McNamer, “The Origins of the *Meditationes vitae Christi*.”

10. Bennett, *Poetry of the Passion*, 34; Fleming, *An Introduction to Franciscan Literature*, 246.

11. Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion*, 10.

12. Taney et al., *Meditations*, 2 (“sweetest mother”); specific indications of Franciscan provenance are noted in Taney et al., *Meditations*, xiv.

13. Fleming, *Introduction to Franciscan Literature*, 2. For a more recent but essentially similar characterization, see Fleming’s remarks in “The Friars and Medieval English Literature.”

14. Fleming, *Introduction to Franciscan Literature*, 3.

15. *Ibid.*, 19–20.

16. Descriptions of these texts can be found in Moorman, *History of the Franciscan Order*, Chaps. 22, 23, and 31, and Fleming, *Introduction to Franciscan Literature*. Many of them have been newly translated and edited in Armstrong et al., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* (4 vols.), which also contains an up-to-date bibliography for both critical editions and

secondary literature.

17. Meditations written by Franciscans before the MVC include Bonaventure's *Itinerarium mentis in deum* (*The Soul's Journey into God*), *De triplici via* (*The Triple Way*), *Lignum vitae* (*Tree of Life*); David of Augsburg's *Kristi Leben unser Vorbild* (*Our Model, the Life of Christ*); Walter of Wimborne's *Marie Carmina*; Ubertino da Casale's *Arbor vitae crucifixae Jesu* (*The Tree of Life*); and James of Milan's *Stimulus amoris* (*The Goad of Love*). Other meditative texts were written by Franciscans during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, some of them influenced by the MVC. But this list of meditative texts composed by Franciscans before the MVC appears to be complete. Both Fleming (*An Introduction to Franciscan Literature*) and Moorman (*A History of the Franciscan Order*) give the impression that the texts listed above exemplify a deeper tradition of meditative writing. But as far as I have been able to determine, these texts do not illustrate a larger phenomenon; they are the phenomenon (I am setting aside here the question of the vernacular lyric, which I discuss as a separate category below). Another meditative work once attributed to Bonaventure, the *Vitis mystica sive Tractatus de passione Domini* (*The Mystical Vine*) is now regarded as spurious; see Brady, "The Edition of the 'Opera Omnia.'"

18. For critical editions of the Latin texts, see Bonaventure, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 5 (*Itinerarium mentis in deum*, 296–313) and vol. 8 (*De triplici via*, 3–18; *Lignum vitae*, 68–86). On Bonaventuran imitation, see esp. Ruh, *Bonaventura deutsch*.

19. For a recent assessment of Bonaventuran "imagination" and its hierarchy of aspirations, with intellectual understanding located at the pinnacle, see Karnes, "Nicholas Love and Medieval Meditations on Christ."

20. Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis*, trans. Cousins, 145. Subsequent parenthetical citations refer to this translation.

21. It is not necessarily the case that extravagant metaphor produces thought at the expense of intimate feelings of love and compassion. John Pecham's hymn "Philomena praevia" (Dreves and Blume, *Analecta hymnica*, vol. 50, 602–16) provides a compelling example of the alternative. As Bruce Holsinger has shown, the "Philomela" uses such metaphor—in this case, complex tropes of song—to powerful affective effect; and the poem as a whole seeks to elicit compassion of a feminized kind in that it asks the reader to imagine Christ's violation in the Passion as sexual violation and to identify with that violated body (see *Music, Body, and Desire*, 225–40). I discuss the feminization of the male reader as a fundamental strategy for eliciting compassion in [Chapter 4](#). While Pecham's text may have been used in private meditation, its status as hymn leads me to set it aside as a part of the meditative literary tradition culminating in the MVC.

22. Bonaventure, *On the Perfection of Life*, 239–40; for the critical text, see *De perfectione vitae ad sorores*, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 8, 106–27.

23. Savage and Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 176.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Bonaventure, *On the Perfection of Life*, 210.

26. Gennaro, "Chiara, Agnese e le prime consorelle," 189.

27. Vauchez, "L'ideal de sainteté dans le mouvement féminin franciscain," 325. Vauchez provides further evidence for the prominence of meditation on the Passion among women in *The Laity in the Middle Ages*.

28. Mueller, *Clare's Letters to Agnes*, 59.

29. *Ibid.*, 95.

30. David of Augsburg's *Kristi Leben unser Vorbild* is structurally quite similar to the MVC, but the impulse is didactic, seldom affective: moral lessons we can learn from the life of Christ are the true subject of the work. The first nine chapters of the *Stimulus amoris* do have much in common with the MVC, and this text enjoyed great popularity in the later Middle Ages. But investigations of the authorship and manuscript tradition have revealed that the whole text was not written by James of Milan: while he can be credited with the treatise on contemplation, the initial chapters on the Passion were written sometime during

the latter half of the fourteenth century by an anonymous author and added to the *Stimulus* thereafter. Kirchberger summarizes the evidence in the introduction to Walter Hilton, *The Goad of Love*. In his *Marie Carmine*, Walter of Wimborne both models and seeks to elicit anger rather than compassion as the appropriate emotional response to the events of the Passion. After the poet figure in Wimborne's text imagines witnessing the making of the cross, for instance, he kills both the carpenter and the smith who made the carpenter's axe. For a compelling analysis, see Dzon, "Conflicting Notions of *Pietas* in Walter of Wimborne's *Marie Carmine*."

31. Ubertino wrote at a time of fierce controversy in the Franciscan Order, between the Spirituals and Conventuals, over the question of poverty; see Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*.

32. "O anima deuota excipe illos clamores horribiles & illas duras impiorum uoces crudeles tanquam sagittas cor tuum perforantes" (Ubertino da Casale, *Arbor vitae*, 314).

33. "Ut sic remaneret nudus in conspectu derisorum & populi circumstantis sicut nudus exiuit de utero uirginis" (Ubertino da Casale, *Arbor vitae*, 316).

34. "Respice anima iaculo compassionis percussa ad tuum dilectum iesum" (Ubertino da Casale, *Arbor vitae*, 317).

35. "Nam in prouintia tuscie ueniens sub titulo studii inueni in multis uiris uirtutis spiritum iesu fortiter ebullire. Inter quos uir deo plenus petrus de senis pectenarius & deuotissima uirgo cecilia de florentia sic me introduxerunt ad arcana iesu quod stupendum essent si scriberetur perspicacitas spiritus eorundem. Nam praefata uirgo quod nunc simul cum praefato petro regnat in celas totum praecessum superioris contemplationis de uita iesu & arcana cordis mei & alia multa de paruulo iesu sepiissime me instruxit" (Ubertino da Casale, *Arbor vitae*, 4). The wording here suggests that Cecilia had greater influence and renown than Peter.

36. *Arbor vitae*, 5; I give here the translation by Lachance, *The Spiritual Journey of the Blessed Angela of Foligno*, 110.

37. Lachance, *The Spiritual Journey*, 60. Lachance's characterization of Angela exposes just how powerful the story of Franciscan influence can be. Lachance himself notes striking parallels between the spirituality of Angela and that of the beguines, whom he acknowledges as preceding the Franciscans in the practice of affective devotion to the humanity of Christ (*The Spiritual Journey*, 58). He also gestures toward the existence of an independent spiritual tradition among women when he describes Clare of Assisi: "As was the case with most religious women of her time, meditation on the passion of Christ and his sufferings occupied a central place in St. Clare's spirituality, even more so than for St. Francis himself" (61–62). Yet he returns reflexively to the standard explanation of "Franciscan influence" when describing Angela: "If the humanity and passion and crucifixion of Christ played such a central role in Angela's journey, this is largely due to St. Francis, her spiritual father" (400).

38. On the complex pressures of gender roles in the formation of Angela's spiritual life, see Mooney, "The Changing Fortunes of Angela of Foligno, Daughter, Mother, and Wife."

39. Sabatier, *Speculum Perfectionis*, Chap. 100.

40. Celano, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* (also known as the *Second Life of St. Francis*), in Armstrong et al., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 2, 331.

41. Jacopone da Todi, *The Lauds*, trans. Hughes, 279; cf. *Laude*, ed. Mancini, 201–6. Jacopone is no longer credited with the celebrated *Stabat mater*; its authorship remains unknown.

42. Italian literary historians seem less eager to press claims for the Franciscan origins of the *laude* than others. For a brief overview of the scholarship, see Varanini's introduction to *Laude dugentesche*. Most Italian scholars see *laude* as part of an Italian folk tradition, not something invented by Jacopone and the Franciscans. Third Order confraternities, however, did have a significant role in the compilation of several early *laudari*. An important thirteenth-century manuscript from Cortona, for example, almost certainly belonged to the Franciscan confraternity of Santa Maria della Laude. This compilation has been edited by Varanini and Banfi; see *Il laudario di Cortona*. David Jeffrey has made the case for the Franciscan origins of the affective Passion lyric most forcefully; see Jeffrey, *The Early English Lyric*. Jeffrey discusses the Italian *laude* in chapter 4. While Jeffrey adduces much evidence for Franciscan involvement in the English lyric tradition, his strongest evidence concerns lyrics written in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; and as Richard Greene points out, many of the Passion lyrics from this period appear to have been influenced either directly or indirectly by the *Meditationes vitae Christi* (see Greene, *The Early English Carols*, clvi, n. 4). Greene is among those who have found Jeffrey's claims for Franciscan involvement in the development of the vernacular lyric exaggerated: "The admiring reader of Professor Jeffrey's work will find it easy to forgive some occasional overstatement of the dominance of specifically Franciscan influence" (cl). There is an exceptionally critical review of Jeffrey's book by Edward Wilson in *Review of English Studies* 28 (1977), 318–21.

43. For a critique of the Corpus Christianorum edition, see McNamer, review of *Iohannis de Caulibus: Meditationes vite Christi*.

44. See McNamer, "The Origins of the *Meditationes vitae Christi*."

45. Taney et al., *Meditations*, 253; cf. Stallings-Taney, *Meditaciones*, 271–2.

46. Taney et al., *Meditations*, 4; cf. Stallings-Taney, *Meditaciones*, 10.

47. It is undoubtedly true that depictions of Christ's divinity can complement his humanity, just as feelings of reverence have the potential to complement compassion. What I seek to expose here are the limits of complementarity and the way these juxtapositions can register as contradiction and conflict. The conflicting affective resonances of the two crucifixions in the MVC comes into sharper relief when compared to the two methods as presented by Ubertino da Casale in his *Arbor vitae*, 317.

48. Derbes, *Picturing the Passion*, 138–57.

49. *Ibid.*, 146.

50. Derbes's focus is on Franciscans, not on gender, but she notes, referring to the work of M. Boskovitz, that "historiated crosses were most often commissioned for female communities, and five of the crosses have been traced to Clarissan houses" (170).

51. *Ibid.*, 147.

52. *Ibid.*, 147, 153.

53. *Ibid.*, 155.

54. Guido's image clearly advocates *imitatio Christi*. But *imitatio Christi* is not the same thing as "compassion," at least not in the sorrow-filled sense that distinguishes late medieval responses to Christ's suffering from emotions described in early Christian literature of martyrdom. The terms *imitatio Christi* and *compassion* are regularly conflated in the scholarship. The distinction between them merits more attention than I can give it here, though I would venture that the difference turns on a preposition. Suffering "with" (beside, in the company of) Christ is not the same as suffering "as" Christ. The former posits an intimate relationship between two people; the latter collapses relationship into a solitary unit of identification.

55. "Fater Iohannes de Caulibus, magnus praedicator et devotus, qui meditationes super

evangelia fecit pulchras" (Bartholomew of Pisa, *De conformitate vitae B. Francisci ad vitam Domini Iesu*, cited in Stallings-Taney, *Meditaciones vite Christi*, x).

56. Taney et al., *Meditations*, 255.

57. The manuscript, consisting of the *Meditations* and three letters of direction addressed to female religious, dates from the early fifteenth century. Fischer lists this copy in his survey but did not personally examine it. I am currently preparing a critical edition of this version of the MVC; a complete paleographical analysis of the manuscript, which was copied in or near Venice, will appear there.

58. Mortara, *Catalogo dei manoscritti italiani*, 179. The Italian manuscripts of the MVC have been examined most extensively by Vaccari ("Le 'Meditazioni della vita de Cristo' in volgare").

59. See McNamer, "The Origins of the *Meditationes vitae Christi*." I thank the editors of *Speculum* for permitting an abridged version of the argument to appear here.

60. Taney et al., *Meditations*, Chap. 36, 124. Here and in subsequent references to the Taney translation, I cite the relevant chapter number before the page reference in order to facilitate cross-referencing to the Corpus Christianorum edition (which Taney et al. follow very faithfully). Other passages that seem to indicate a practice of interpolation include the following: "Let us begin, therefore, with the Incarnation; but we can insert [*precessisse*] certain meditations preceding the Incarnation" (Prol., 4); "However, for your instruction I shall intersperse [*intereram*] commentaries, moral teachings, and quotations of the saints as they occur to me" (Chap. 21, 88); "For good reason I have decided to insert [*opponere*] two events here" (Chap. 67, 218); "However, it is unnecessary to bring into your meditation the moral points and references I have interpolated in this work [*in hoc opere posui*] for your instruction, unless such should occur to you of itself as an immediate means of acquiring some virtue or detesting some vice" (Chap. 108, 332).

61. Taney et al., Chap. 18, 80. For simplicity's sake, I follow the scholarly convention of referring to the chapters up to and including the Baptism as the "Infancy" and the chapters treating the Passion through the Ascension as the "Passion."

62. Stallings, *Meditaciones de passione Christi*, 3–35; McNamer, "Further Evidence," 251–8.

63. Although Stallings-Taney asserts, in the introduction to her critical edition of the MVC, that the work was composed first in Latin, both the reasoning and the evidence adduced in support of this assertion are highly questionable; see McNamer, review. Much deference has been given to Cellucci's very cursory treatment of the question of the original language. Observing certain Latinate expressions and verb forms in the Italian versions, Cellucci concluded that they could only be explained as mistranslations from the Latin ("Le 'Meditationes vitae Christi'"). But Cellucci had not absorbed the work of Sorio, who studied the Italian versions in the mid-nineteenth century and noted that such constructions were a common feature of literary Italian in the fourteenth century, employed by such skilled writers as Catherine of Siena and Boccaccio (*Cento meditazioni*, 28–9).

64. Fischer, "Die *Meditationes vitae Christi*," 468–83, esp. 481.

65. Cellucci, "Le 'Meditationes vitae Christi,'" 61.

66. For an overview of the use of Italian at this time, see Petrucci, *Writers and Readers in Medieval Italy*.

67. McNamer, "Further Evidence."

68. Sarri, "Le meditazioni," 43–44, 76, 83.

69. "Hora habiamo decto della nativitate del signore nostro miser Iesu Cristo" (fol. 17r–17v).

70. "Hai veduto lo nascimento del nostro santissimo Principe Messer Jesù Cristo e similamente lo parto della Reina del mondo" (Sarri, "Le meditazioni," 32).

71. "Et qui tu poi vedere" (f. 18r); "tu poi ben pensare" (f. 19v); cf. Sarri, "Le meditazioni," 62: "Fa che ... t'inginocchi a santo Joanni."

72. "Or se tu vedesti la madre & anche la Magdalena piançere cum grandi sospiri forsi che tu non te poresti tenere de piançere cum loro. Or pensa come doveano stare tribulate" (f.

73. “Modestamente e pianamente”; Sarri, “*Le meditazioni*,” 289.

74. “Et poi basiaua le braccia & quell innocentissime mane le qualle erano così crudelmente vulnerate, et il pecto sacratissimo che fo aperto da quella ruda lancia del qualle ussire sangue & aqua. Et quello corpo sanctissimo il qualle fo tanto batuto & lacerato, & quelle gambe benigne che furono così flagellate. Et poi vene a quelli piedi beatissimi gli qualli furono conficti nella croce cum quello asperissimo chiodo & non se potea saciare de basiarli” (f. 102v). The full scene of lament takes up three folios.

75. “Et poi lui fo menato lì dove era la croce destesa. Et qui così nudo furiosamente fo branchato & desteso sopra della croce cum molte ingiurie, & qui erano apparecchiati i chiodi. Et allora gli ministri presseno la mano drita & sì la messeno per meço el buso della croce & poi li messeno el chiodo nella mano & començono ad inchiodarla. Et hai me, come fo gran pena questa a miser Iesu. Et sapi etiando che ogni botta de martello era una bota de cortello alla sua dolcissima madre. Et inchiodado che haveno la mano drita, si branchorono la sinistra & quella non conçeua al buso. Allora quelli maledeti si començorono a tirarla per forza per farla gonçere al segno. Et tanto gli tirò quello braccio che tutti i nodi se largono.... O come grande dolore sostiene qui el signore nostro.... Et poi li messeno uno piede sopra laltro & cum uno grosso chiodo gli ficherano. Or pensa che dolore era quello!” (ff. 90v–91r).

76. “Unde si leçe de Sancto Francesco che le revelatione occulte non manifestava de fuora se non in quanto el constreçea la carita del proximo” (f. 61v); “Thus one reads of Saint Francis that he did not disclose secret revelations unless the love of neighbor required it.” Cf. Bonaventure, *Legenda maior*, 603.

77. “Et qui poi tu pensare la povertade della verçene Maria, imperò che tornoe a casa sua in la quale non era nè pane nè vino nè alcuno bene tereno. Et non haveano nè possessione nè dinari. Pensa che stetenno tre mesi cum loro che forsi erano ben ricchi. Et hora tornano alla sua povertade açiò che lavorando cum le sue mane sostegnano la vita loro. O specchio di povertade, habili compassione & attendi di amare povertade!” (f. 11r); “And here you may imagine the poverty of the Virgin Mary, for she returned to her house in which there was neither bread nor wine nor any worldly goods. And they had no possessions or money. Consider that they stayed three months with those who were perhaps quite rich. And now they return to their poverty, so that they make a living through the work of their hands. O mirror of poverty, have compassion and strive to love poverty!”

78. “Ma di che viveva miser Iesu per camino. Io penso che lui andava cercando elmosina de porta in porta & la nocte andava a dormire all’ospedale. Et tuto questo facea miser Iesu per amore della povertade” (f. 46r).

79. “Et allora el maestro de la povertade humelmente porse la mano & vergognosamente ricevette la elmosina loro. O anima la quale sei venuta al servizio de Dio, pensa qui et habi compassione al tuo signore el qualle per insegnarti la via del cielo ha voluto eleçerse così stretta povertade. Adonque sforçate de seguirarlo” (f. 33r–v).

80. For evidence of Cecilia’s exemplary status as *sponsa Christi* in late medieval Italy, see esp. Connolly, *Mourning into Joy*.

81. Sarri, “*Le meditazioni*,” 88.

82. For evidence of scribal activity among Poor Clares, see esp. Nicolini, “I minori osservanti di Monteripido e la ‘scriptorium’ delle clarisse di Monteluçe.”

83. Ubertino da Casale, *Arbor vitae*, 4.

84. Moorman, “The Clarisses in the Fourteenth Century,” in *A History of the Franciscan Order*, 406–16.

85. Moorman, *History*, 413 n. 1.

86. Sarri, “*Le meditazioni*,” 76.

87. The containment of the “carnal” qualities of the original MVC by its redactor bears consideration in relation to the practices of gendered hermeneutics as discussed by Carolyn Dinshaw; see *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*. On the conflicting attitudes of the friars toward holy women, often marked by “admiring fascination with the women” on the one hand, and “the

vigorous assertion of orthodoxy” on the other, see John Coakley, “Gender and the Authority of the Friars,” esp. 449–50.

CHAPTER 4. FEELING LIKE A WOMAN

1. Rolle, *English Writings*, trans. Allen, 9–10. The incident is recorded in the *Officium de Sancto Ricardo de Hampole*, composed ca. 1380. The date of Rolle’s conversion is not known, but it probably took place between about 1315 and 1320. He was nineteen years old at the time, according to the *Officium*; but the date of his birth is uncertain, with estimates ranging from ca. 1300 to the early 1290s.

2. Bartlett provides an astute reading of Rolle’s “signature” and its function in late medieval England, noting especially that texts “ascribed to such authorities as Rolle, Bernard, and Augustine could be copied and circulated at will, safe from the suspicion of heresy that conditioned much textual production in the later Middle Ages” (preface to Horstmann, *Yorkshire Writers*; pages unnumbered).

3. My use of the phrase “feeling like a woman” is informed by the distinction Carolyn Dinshaw has drawn between “reading as a man” and “reading like a man.” The former, as Dinshaw uses the terms, is an activity engaged in by men; the latter is a species of gender performance, one that both women and men can practice (*Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, 28–30). While Judith Butler’s more recent work has altered the ground for such distinctions (in that it posits that gender is constituted only through its performance), I retain the term *like* because of its capacity to signal—more clearly than *as*—the performed quality of the practice of feeling.

4. I confine my discussion here to extended meditations, taking up the lyric in [Chapters 5](#) and especially [6](#).

5. Lutz, *Unnatural Emotions*, 5.

6. The dictum, “texts are worldly,” is of course Edward Said’s; even or especially “when they appear to deny it, [texts] are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted” (*The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 4). For explorations of the political functions of later Middle English meditative texts (ca. 1350–1530), including their instrumentality in shaping subjectivities, see esp. Beckwith, *Christ’s Body*; Aers and Staley, *The Powers of the Holy*; Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers*; Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change”; and Bryan, *Looking Inward*.

7. Rolle, *Prose and Verse*, ed. Ogilvie-Thomson, 26. Unless otherwise indicated, parenthetical citations from Rolle’s works refer to this edition.

8. On the difference between Rolle’s English and Latin works, Watson writes: “A peculiarity of Rolle’s English writings, directed in their first instance almost exclusively at their female audience, is the far greater emphasis they place on Passion meditation than do the Latin works. *Emendatio Vitae* commends such meditation only with qualifications ... (‘I judge that this meditation is more useful than any other for those newly turned to Christ’). Both *Ego Dormio* ... and *The Commandment* ... on the contrary, commend it unreservedly at fairly advanced stages of the spiritual life, and several lyrics, notably ‘Ihesu, Goddis son,’ ‘I sigh and sob’ and ‘Ihesu swet’, are sophisticated exercises in the genre none of which assumes the reader is a new convert. Like devotion to the Holy Name, Passion meditation is considered especially suitable for those whose spiritual lives are structured around the ‘carnal’ image of marriage to Christ” (Watson, *Richard Rolle*, 240–41).

9. Watson, *Richard Rolle*, 242.

10. *Ibid.*, 223. Rolle’s authorship of the Passion meditations—of which there are three distinct versions—remains a vexed question. Because a fragment of *Meditation A* appears in Longleat MS 29, which, according to S. J. Ogilvie-Thomson, may descend from an “autograph collection” made by Rolle for Margaret Kirkby, *Meditation A* has until recently had a relatively secure place in the canon of Rolle’s writings (see Rolle, *Prose and Verse*, xv).

Thomas Bestul has recently questioned the attribution of the *Meditation A* to Rolle on the grounds that a number of the motifs in *Meditation A* derive from Latin texts (in particular, the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi*) for which there is little or no evidence of circulation in England before Rolle's death (Bestul, "The Passion Meditations of Richard Rolle"). However, I would point out that the only passage in *Meditation A* that is, as Bestul shows, directly modeled on the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, is not typical of the whole. Rather, the relevant passage, concerning the appearance of the archangel Michael to Christ in the garden of Gethsemane, reads like an interpolation: its rhetorical structure is manifestly unlike the rest of *Meditation A*. Thus, it remains possible that *Meditation A* was composed before the middle of the fourteenth century and that the passage cited by Bestul was added sometime between 1350 and the early fifteenth century, when the two manuscripts containing *Meditation A* (in whole or in part) were copied. As for *Meditation B*, the fact that there are two distinct versions of this text ("Text I" and "Text II") has been insufficiently recognized in the scholarship on Rolle. But as Margery Morgan observed in an article written in 1953, Text II—the text normally referred to simply as *Meditation B*—is quite different from Text I and probably reflects the revisions of someone who was not the author of Text I ("Versions of the Meditations on the Passion Ascribed to Richard Rolle"). Taken together, the work of Morgan and Bestul suggests that while Text II of *Meditation B* is likely to have been adapted in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth centuries and thus not composed by Rolle, there is no serious obstacle to assigning Text I to the first half of the fourteenth century. It may or may not have been composed by Rolle; the evidence is inconclusive. What seems more certain is that the text was first composed for female religious. The first part of Text I is based very closely on a set of Anglo-Norman meditations found in an early-fourteenth-century manuscript that probably belonged to the nuns of Amesbury Abbey (Cambridge University Library MS Ee.vi.16). Moreover, Text I draws on a tradition of Middle English meditations for women represented by the *Wooing of Our Lord* and related prose rhapsodies. Stylistically, as Morgan points out, it is replete with a rhetorical feature "peculiar to" those texts and to the *Wooing's* clear descendant, *A Talkyng of the Loue of God*: "polysyndetic structure, lack of subordination of clause to clause" (Morgan, "Versions of the Meditations on the Passion Ascribed to Richard Rolle," 96). My own conclusion is that Rolle is likely to have composed *Meditation A* and Text I (also known as the "Shorter Meditation") of *Meditation B*; Text II (the "Longer Meditation") of Text B is likely to have been altered and expanded by a redactor. (I would like to thank Jayne Ringrose, deputy keeper of manuscripts, Cambridge University Library, for checking unpublished notes by M. R. James in which he accepts the Amesbury provenance of Ee.vi.16; this possibility had been marked with a query in Neil Ker's *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain*.)

11. Hilton, "Epistle on the Mixed Life," in Horstmann, ed., *Yorkshire Writers*, 264–92; 264. I quote from the oldest version, that in the Vernon manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS eng. poet. a. 1). S. J. Ogilvie-Thomson has edited the text from London, Lambeth Palace MS 472; see her *Walter Hilton's Mixed Life*. It is significant, I think, that even as Hilton addresses his text to this "worldli lord," he presents meditation as an intimate, eroticized practice, one of kissing Christ's mouth ("thou makest the to cus his mouth be deuocion of gostly preyere"; Horstmann, 272).

12. See the evidence given in Rolle, *Prose and Verse*, ed. Ogilvie-Thomson, xxxi.

13. Watson, *Richard Rolle*, 18.

14. The series of extended metaphors appears in Rolle, *Prose and Verse*, 74–75. See note 10, above, on the probability of interpolation.

15. Horstmann, *Yorkshire Writers*, 86.

16. *Ibid.*, 91.

17. *Ibid.*, 88.

18. On the circulation of Middle English texts originally written for female religious, see especially the important article on the manuscript evidence by Innes-Parker, "The 'Gender-

Gap' Reconsidered."

19. Aelred of Rievaulx's *De institutione: Two English Versions*, ed. Ayto and Barratt, 46, 47 (Vernon version).

20. The two manuscripts are the Vernon Manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS eng. poet. a. 1), and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 423.

21. Cowper, *Meditations on the Supper*, 1.

22. *Ibid.*, 26.

23. Thomas of Hales, *The Lyf of Oure Lady*, 96. Sarah Horrall discusses the inscriptions that indicate male ownership on pp. 17 and 19. Inscriptions of male ownership in manuscripts in this period often reflect patriarchal convention rather than exclusive use; wives and other members of the extended family (often including servants) would almost certainly have been included in household devotions or used the books for private meditation. My point here is not that men were the only readers of these texts but that, as owners of the manuscripts, they are likely to have read them; and when they did, they would have been addressed as "modris."

24. Hogg, ed., *The Speculum Devotorum*, 1.

25. Horstmann, *Seven Poyntes*, 325.

26. Thomas of Hales, *The Lyf of Oure Lady*; Hoccleve "Lamentacioun of the Grene Tree"; Marx and Drennan, *The Middle English Prose Complaint of Our Lady*; Horstmann, "Lamentacion of Oure Lady," and "St. Mary's Lamentation to St. Bernard"; and Garrett, "De arte lacrimandi."

27. Garrett, ed., "De arte lacrimandi," 270.

28. *Ibid.*, 278.

29. *Ibid.*, 280.

30. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*, 114.

31. Aelred of Rievaulx's *De institutione: Two English Versions*, ed. Ayto and Barratt, 47.

32. Kane, ed., *Prickynge*, 16.

33. Westra, ed., *A Talkyng of the Loue of God*, xxx. The passage cited here is so lyrical that it could be considered an embedded lyric. Like the *Wooing of Our Lord*, the *Talkyng* seeks to stir up a passionate kind of compassion through rhythm and rhyme.

34. *Ibid.*, 48–50.

35. *Ibid.*, *A Talkyng of the Loue of God*, 48, 52.

36. Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, ed. Sargent, 10. Subsequent parenthetical citations refer to this edition.

37. It is clear from evidence of the surviving manuscripts and printed texts, as well as from other sources, that the *Mirror* was indeed read by such a mixed audience. In her study of the manuscripts of the *Mirror*, Carol Meale has shown that the text was "accessible to individuals and communities representative of virtually every rank and degree within the higher echelons of contemporary society, from prelates, enclosed religious (male and female), and lay clergy, to earls and countesses, wealthy gentry, and members of the urban bourgeoisie" ("Oft sithes with grete deuotion I thought what I might do plesyng to god": The Early Ownership and Readership of Love's *Mirror*," 20).

38. On the function of prologues more generally, see Galloway, "Middle English Prologues," and Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*.

39. Carruthers, "Rhetorical *Ductus*," 102, 101.

40. *Ibid.*, 104.

41. This framing device has not been recognized as a framing device—and thus as a powerfully functional aspect of the text—in the scholarship. But given the ubiquity of framing devices in Middle English literature at this time (as exemplified in the works of Chaucer, Langland, and Gower), it merits attention as a meaningful part of the structure of the text.

42. On these gospels, see de Hamel, *The Book: A History of the Bible*, 114–39. Early books of hours are of similarly intimate size and feel. For example, the De Brailles Hours (British

Library Add. 49999), which appears to have been made for a woman ca. 1240, measures just 15 × 12 cm. Eamon Duffy gives a succinct description of these early, small books of hours for women in *Marking the Hours*, 6–13. The term *uterine vellum* has been debated; the general consensus now is that this very fine skin did not come from animal fetuses but from newborn or stillborn lamb, calf, or goat. If lamb, the symbolic value of the material object, especially to female religious, would have been enhanced. I know of no studies linking small devotional books for women to the “bundle of myrrh” of the *Songs*, but this connection merits investigation, especially in light of the reference here to how Cecilia carries her book. For a general study of the changing cultural meanings of the breast in the West, see Yalom, *A History of the Breast*. For male monastics, imagining the self with the breasts of a female lover was a practice popularized through Bernard of Clairvaux’s *On the Song of Songs*; here, a similar practice is offered by Love to his lay male readers. The adoption of the role of the bride of the *Song of Songs* by lay men in medieval England remains an understudied topic, one that could well begin with a focused investigation of the circulation of Rolfe’s *Song*-inflected writings among lay men such as Robert Thornton. Important studies of books and embodiment include the essays collected in Frese and O’Keeffe, *The Book and the Body*, and Jager, *The Book of the Heart*.

43. Recent work in this area includes Hanawalt and Kobialka, eds., *Medieval Practices of Space*; Spicer and Hamilton, eds., *Defining the Holy*; and Beattie et al., eds., *The Medieval Household in Christian Europe*. For more theoretical reflections, see esp. Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*; Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*; and Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*.

44. The two meanings are not mutually exclusive, of course; see Fyler, “Men, Man, and Woman in Chaucer.” On the “privy chamber” as feminized space, see Spearing, “Public and Private Spaces.”

45. For the way the feminine symbolism of these spaces is highlighted in illuminated manuscripts of the *MVC*, see the images reproduced from Paris, Bibliothèque National MS Ital. 115, in Ragusa and Green, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, 23–25. Flora discusses the images from this manuscript, made for female religious, in “A Book for Poverty’s Daughters.”

46. Hale, *Imitatio Mariae*. Gail McMurray Gibson also observes that Love’s parent text, the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, fosters identification with the Virgin in what can be termed *imitatio Mariae*. She writes: “The Pseudo-Bonaventure’s determination to leave the Virgin Mary out of no crucial moment of Incarnation history is everywhere apparent in the *Meditationes*. In fact, it might be argued that the primary devotional model offered by the *Meditationes vitae Christi* is *imitatio Mariae* instead of *imitatio Christi*; that is, although the text renders the humanity and suffering of the life of Christ in lingering and loving detail, the paradigm urged upon the reader is the life of [Mary]” (Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion*, 49–50).

47. Denise Despres offers an extended analysis of visualization in the *Meditationes vitae Christi* in *Ghostly Sights*, 34–54; Despres does not describe the *MVC*’s mode of seeing as fundamentally gendered. The scholarship on visualization and affective meditation is too copious to cite in any comprehensive way here, but see Stanbury, “The Virgin’s Gaze,” which illuminates the eroticism of maternal looking, as well as her compelling recent study, *The Visual Object of Desire*, esp. chap. 6, “Nicholas Love’s *Mirror*: Dead Images and the Life of Christ,” 172–190; Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary*; and Newman, “What Did It Mean to Say ‘I Saw’?”

48. Ambrose of Milan, *De institutione virginis*: PL 16: 7. Like other writers of his time, Ambrose presents Mary as bearer of the faith throughout the Passion and emphasizes the manlike strength she obtained by virtue of her virginity. I discuss the historical development of the Virgin’s compassion more fully in [Chapter 5](#).

49. Williams, *Keywords*. Although “beholding” is not an emotion, it can reveal a culturally specific emotional structure for reasons similar to those articulated by Anna Wierzbicka in her discussion of context and grammar; see *Emotions Across Languages and Cultures*, esp. 1–

50. On the overlapping concerns of historical phenomenology and the history of emotion, see Paster et al., *Reading the Early Modern Passions*, introduction, esp. 13–18, and the essay by Bruce R. Smith (“Hearing Green”) in that volume, as well as Smith’s groundbreaking study, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England*. See also Stanbury’s suggestive comments on the theory of “species” in medieval optics and the conflation of the visual and the tactile; *The Visual Object of Desire*, esp. 6–7.

51. The *MED* aligns the term with a generalized sense of “seeing,” noting that “in ME, the range of meanings corresp. largely to that of L. *respicio*” (*MED*, *biholden*). In its definition of *beholder*, the *OED*’s single entry is “one who beholds, a watcher, looker on, spectator”—a collapsing of terms that effaces the qualitatively different ways of seeing that seem to be recorded and triggered by the Middle English differences between these terms, although it is interesting to note that one as attuned to shades of meaning as Shakespeare continues to understand the particular affective power of “beholding,” its profound links to empathetic response: “All the beholders take his part with weeping” (*As You Like It*, I, ii, 139).

52. *biholden*, 2a. Examples include “Lauerd, Bihald me ant help me!” and “Lord, mi liif me bihold.... Astow art lord so fre, thou lete me neuer spille.” The first example is from *St. Margaret* (1) (Bod 34), c. 1225, 20/1; the second is from *Tristrem* (Auch), c. 1330, 392.

53. The *MED* entry for 1b (a), for instance, includes a line from a devotional lyric: “Wan hic him bi-holde wyt hey and herte bothe.” The difference between this example and a line taken from the same lyric but listed under 1a strikes me as minimal, yet they are listed under different senses of the term. The overriding unity of sense deserves to be pointed out: both are instances of empathetic gazing. The copious use of the term in *The Privy of the Passion* and in abundant devotional lyrics could be adduced as further evidence.

54. In Chapter 51, for instance, concerning the parable of the lord and servant, Julian first describes the lord “looking” on his servant (“The lorde loketh upon his servant full lovely and swetly,” *A Revelation of Love*, 273). This kind of seeing, significantly, happens before the fall. When the servant falls, Julian describes herself “beholding”—gazing at the scene empathetically. The lord then “beholds” the servant who has fallen: “And right thus continuantly his loveing lorde full tenderly beholdeth him, and now with a doubil chere. One outwarde, full mekly and mildely, with gret rewth and pitte” (275). Julian’s attempts to understand this parable visually are empathetic attempts: “beginning my beholding at the lorde and at the servant” (277). The phrasing here seems to signal a process of understanding that begins with empathetic perception and emotion. She speaks of “how God beholdeth alle manne and his falling” (279), “in what manner he beholdeth us in oure sinne” (279). It is quite significant, in my view, that Julian works outward from this beholding: it is *because* she knows that God “beholds” the servant that she works out a theology that takes such empathetic holding as her starting point. Such beholding necessarily saves: “The merciful beholding of his lovely chere fulfilled all erth and descended downe with Adam into helle, with which continuant pitte Adam was kepte fro endlesse deth” (279).

55. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, *behealdan*: “to hold, have, occupy, possess.”

56. Neurologist Frank Wilson describes holding and grasping as forms of somatic intelligence that can produce ways of thinking; see his rich analysis in *The Hand: How Its Use Shapes the Brain, Language, and Human Culture*. For an extended discussion of gesture as language, see David McNeill, *Hand and Mind*. McNeill does not argue that gestures can shape the mind (or emotions) but rather that they are important expressive indicators. For the medieval period, J. A. Burrow’s *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* provides a very useful descriptive account of the language of the body in literary texts. Burrow does not treat beholding as an independent category of seeing.

57. The addition of “men” after “armed” reflects Sargent’s editorial decision that without “men,” the passage made no sense; but in my view, it is significant that the text, as scripted,

says that this goes without saying. This line crystallizes how profoundly arms are understood to make the man.

58. This triangulated structure of masculine beholding is foreshadowed early on by Joseph at the Nativity. As the Virgin gazes on her child and feels tender love for him, Joseph wants to participate in this affective moment. But his approach is not to share the Virgin's direct, affectionate gaze. Instead, he participates in the scene by bustling around in an attempt to serve her and make her more comfortable: "Joseph also honouryng & wirchipyng the child god & man, toke the sadel of the Asse, & made therof a quischyn oure lady to sitte on & a suppoyle to leyn to" (38–39). Joseph's vicarious mode of responding to the child is also apparent in a scene that prefigures the death of Christ: the loss of the twelve-year-old boy in Jerusalem. Joseph does indeed sorrow and weep in this scene. But in doing so, the implication is that he is weeping on account of Mary's distress—grieving because she is at such a loss, rather than for any direct emotions he may feel at the child's disappearance. Only Mary's anguish at the loss of the child is described, while all we hear of "the sely old man Joseph" is that he "folowed hir algate wepyng" (58). On continental depictions of Joseph in the fifteenth century, which also position Joseph as one who follows or imitates Mary (often, to comic effect, ineptly), see Hale, "Joseph as Mother."

59. See especially the studies by Jeffrey Hamburger, "Brother, Bride and *alter Christus*" (which situates John in a history of virginity and notes that a man's entry into the religious life was often imagined as voluntary emasculation) and *St. John the Divine*. Unlike so many of the sources cited by Hamburger, the *Mirror* does not explicitly highlight John's virginity.

60. The topic of the figure of John in relation to the topos of the *paene puella puer*, and more generally to ways of imagining a third gender, deserves more extensive treatment than I can give it here. Bynum's analysis of the performance of feminine roles by male religious in the high Middle Ages is clearly a relevant spur to further thinking about the issue (see *Jesus as Mother*, 110–69, and "Men's Use of Female Symbols" in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 282–94), as is Hamburger's study of Henry Suso's performance of feminine roles ("Medieval Self-Fashioning: Authorship, Authority, and Autobiography in Suso's *Exemplar*," in *The Visual and the Visionary*, 233–77). For non-medieval studies of third gender as concept, image, and practice, see esp. Garber, *Vested Interests*; Herdt, *Third Sex, Third Gender*; and the work of Judith Butler on gender performance.

61. On this tradition, see Hausscherr, "Über die Christus-Johannes-Gruppen."

62. John's status as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23, 19:26, 20:2, etc.) is also highly relevant in this context. As John Boswell observes, men who loved other men were often called "effeminate" in antiquity and in the medieval period (*Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 24, 99, 67–68, 187, 229–30, 234–35, 339–40).

63. On youth and its relation to varieties of masculinity in the later Middle Ages, see especially Karras, *From Boys to Men*. Burrow cites the classic texts that assert that the state of youth is essentially defined by changeability: in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, a youth is "changeable and fickle"; in Horace's *Ars Poetica*, the "beardless youth" is "easily moulded like wax" and "quick to change"; in Chaucer's translation of the *Roman de la Rose*, "Youth sett man in all folye ... / So ofte it chaungith of corage" (Burrow, *Ages of Man*, 192, 195, 167). The age of full maturity varied but was generally quite late: twenty-five, thirty, or even later. The influential *Canon* of Avicenna sets the end of youth at thirty (Burrow, *Ages of Man*, 7, 23).

64. In his classic study of the liminal, Victor Turner notes that those who inhabit liminal zones "may be symbolically assigned characteristics of both sexes, irrespective of their biological sex"; see esp. Chapter 4, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*," in *The Forest of Symbols*, 93–111; 98.

65. Michael Camille observes that "[o]penings, entrances and doorways ... were especially important liminal zones" in the medieval period (*Image on the Edge*, 16).

66. In Giotto's *Lamentation*, which may have been known to the author of the *Meditationes vitae Christi* (McNamer, "Further Evidence," 258–61), John is literally the

central figure; he is not only positioned in the center of the pictorial frame but also between the group of women and the men as a figure who mediates between feminine emotionalism and masculine stoicism. On the highly symbolic character of gesture in Giotto's "naturalistic" art, see Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture*.

67. The concept of "actualizing absence" is fundamental to the burgeoning field of historical performance studies; see esp. the introductory essay by Franko and Richards, "Actualizing Absence," in *Acting on the Past*.

68. Iser, "The Reading Process," 50, 54.

69. In *Male Authors, Female Readers*, Anne Bartlett offers a particularly rich and nuanced analysis of how practices of resisting reading may have been facilitated by the "counter-discourses" she observes in Middle English devotional texts. Her bibliography serves as a convenient list of the foundational works in reader-response theory and relevant scholarship in medieval studies up to 1995. Performance theory has since absorbed and extended many of the core thematics of reception theory and its relation to practices of resistance. Michel de Certeau's concept of "tactics" has been particularly influential; see *The Practice of Everyday Life*, and, for an astute deployment of the concept in relation to late Middle English saints' lives for women and modes of exemplarity, see Catherine Sanok, *Her Life Historical*.

70. Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 42.

71. As the first major heresy in England, the Lollard movement was a threat to the status quo on many levels. Here, I refer simply to the Lollards' use of vernacular religious writings to attempt to convince a wide audience that the clergy should not have sole authority over the interpretation of scripture. Affective meditations, by diverting readers from the scriptural texts themselves and from rigorous intellectual activity, tended to be rejected by the Lollards, as Aers, among others, has argued; see esp. "The Humanity of Christ: Representations in Wycliffite Texts and *Piers Plowman*," in *Powers of the Holy*, 43–76.

72. Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, 10.

73. Nicholas Watson's 1995 groundbreaking article "Censorship and Cultural Change" has had the perhaps unintended effect of diverting scholarship away from the study of affective meditations and other "simple" orthodox devotional texts since its publication, and, more profoundly still, has initiated a practice of reading Middle English religious texts—orthodox, heterodox, and mixed—for the "vernacular theology" (the intellectual content or doctrinal "information") embedded in them. For a recent judicious summary of the current state of this subfield and the influence of Watson's article, see Vincent Gillespie, "Vernacular Theology." The recent article by Michelle Karnes, "Nicholas Love and Medieval Meditations on Christ," further underscores the view that the *Mirror* is a "simple" text. Through a close comparative analysis, Karnes shows that Love makes many changes to his source text, the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, which curtail the activity of the imagination in ways that appear to close off intellectual endeavor. Kieckhefer's astute comment on the state of scholarship on the *Mirror* up to 1995 also goes a long way toward explaining why this text, of such acknowledged historical importance, has received relatively little critical attention: "The assumption that a figure is more interesting if he or she is somehow naughty, and that a text becomes genuinely interesting only when it can be shown subversive, tells us a great deal about current academic predilections and somewhat less about medieval culture" ("Recent Work on Pseudo-Bonaventure and Nicholas Love," 47).

74. Butler, *Gender Trouble*. This simple structural feature may help explain why it is that relatively few women compared with men appear to have participated actively in the Lollard movement. For the most thorough investigation of gender and Lollardy to date, see McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy*. Conduct books provide ample evidence of the way the performance of compassion could enhance a woman's social rank by making her more "womanly." In *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*, for instance, the persona of the father writing the book for his daughters explicitly advises them to follow the "ensaumple ... of the good ladies that wepte for oure Lorde" in having "hertis pitous." This notion is

undergirded by a naturalized difference between a man's heart and a woman's, made doubly authoritative via its sourcing to an anonymous patriarch: "And as the wise man saithe, 'The woman of nature shulde be pitous moche more thanne the man, for the man is of more of harde corage than the woman.' And, therefor, it is saide, a woman that is not humble and pitous she is mannisshe and not womanly, whiche is a uice in womanhode to be rude or of hautigne corage. And also the wise man saithe, a woman shulde not be a chiche [niggardly] of that she hathe in gret plente, that is to saye, of wepinge teris, and of piteous herte, to haue pitee on the pore peple, vpon her kyn and frendes, that she seithe in necessitee" (Wright, *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*, 135–36). On conduct, considered within the frame of performance studies, see *Medieval Conduct*, ed. Ashley and Clark, especially the essay by Clark, "Constructing the Female Subject in Late Medieval Devotion."

75. I adopt this useful term from Rice, "Devotional Literature and Lay Spirituality: *Imitatio clerici* in *Book to a Mother*."

76. Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change," 854, 855, 858; the reference to "traditional" religion is to Duffy's influential *Stripping of the Altars*.

77. In pursuing this line of thought, I seek to reopen and extend Beckwith's comments on the unpredictable effects—potentially both conservative and radical or a mixture of the two—of reading Love's *Mirror*: "Although Love's principal target was Lollardy, the *Mirror* was by no means chiefly a doctrinal refutation of Lollard heresy, but rather, like the Bernardine piety that so pressured and informed it, an attempt to reimagine and invent the kinds of subjectivities, loving subjectivities who would ardently desire to be obedient to God's will, now made synonymous with clerical will. Ultimately this project was a very dangerous one for, by helping to introduce and expand the notion of the radical reflexivity of the human will, such piety ultimately gave an extraordinary dynamism to lay piety, whilst it subtly deauthorized clerical authority" (*Christ's Body*, 69–70).

78. In proposing that such affective meditations as the *Mirror* functioned as sites of affective and cognitive experimentation, I draw on a significant body of critical work that usually aligns such experimentation with the reading of fiction. See esp., for the concept of "emotional flexibility," Feagin, *Reading with Feeling*, and for the way fiction functions as a way to try on mental states that might then function extratextually, see Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*. Among the abundant theoretical models and historical instances of the ways in which "woman" can function as a basis for cultural critique and innovation, see the influential, historically grounded analysis by Davis, "Woman on Top" (in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, 150–51) and Kristeva's considerations of marginality and subversion in *Revolution in Poetic Language*.

79. In neurology, the work of Richard J. Davidson, which has shown that the regular practice of meditation among Tibetan monks has demonstrably altered their neural pathways, has been particularly significant. For a summary of his findings, see "Toward a Biology of Positive Affect and Compassion" (especially the section on "Affective Plasticity") in Davidson and Harrington, eds., *Visions of Compassion*. See also LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain*, and Damasio, *Descartes' Error* and *The Feeling of What Happens*. Leading studies in philosophy include de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion*, and Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*.

CHAPTER 5. MARIAN LAMENT AND THE RISE OF A VERNACULAR ETHICS

1. Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Love*, 211.

2. Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 176, 181.

3. The distinction between Christians and other human beings, especially Jews and "Saracens," is crucial. Medieval depictions of the Passion are often strongly anti-Semitic, and as much recent work has shown, they served to heighten intolerance and violence toward Jews in medieval Europe. See esp. Bestul, Chap. 3, "The Representation of the Jews in Medieval Passion Narratives," in *Texts of the Passion*; Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*;

Rubin, *Gentile Tales*; and, for iconographic evidence of medieval anti-Semitism in scenes of the Passion, Mellinkoff, *Outcasts*. The pervasive nontransferability of compassion to Jews and Muslims in late medieval culture is an obvious, historically contingent instance of “withholding,” which Berlant astutely characterizes as the structural obverse of compassion; see “Introduction: Compassion (and Withholding),” in *Compassion*, 1–13.

4. Bennett, *Poetry of the Passion*, 60.

5. Kane, *The Prickyng of Love*, 63. On the relation between meditation and the works of mercy, see also Hilton’s *Epistle on the Mixed Life*, esp. 64–65.

6. Rubin, *Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge*, 1.

7. As R. I. Moore has pointed out, the creation of such “charitable” institutions as leprosaria appears to have been motivated in part by a desire to segregate lepers, to purify society of their presence; see *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*.

8. Rubin, *Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge*, 93.

9. See esp. Chap. 5, “The Passion of Christ and the Institution of Torture,” in Bestul, *Texts of the Passion*, 145–64. On the history of torture more generally, see Peters, *Torture*, and Langbein, *Torture and the Law of Proof*. Mitchell Merback engages with similar questions from an art-historical perspective in *The Thief, the Cross, and the Wheel: Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*. Merback’s privileging of the term *spectacle* perhaps forecloses recognition of the qualitatively distinct way of seeing I have identified in Middle English meditations: “beholding.” See also Esther Cohen, “Towards a History of European Physical Sensibility”; Holsinger’s discussion of thirteenth-century “philopassianism” (a term coined by Cohen) in “The Musical Body in Pain,” chap. 5 in *Music, Body, and Desire*; Enders, *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty*, which focuses on medieval France; and, for discussions not centered on medieval culture, Spelman, *Fruits of Sorrow*; Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*; Berlant, *Compassion*; and Scarry, *The Body in Pain*.

10. Bestul, *Texts of the Passion*, 160.

11. *Ibid.*, 160, 161. Bestul adopts the concept of “hidden alliances” from Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies*.

12. Bestul, *Texts of the Passion*, 154.

13. Judicial torture was not as widely practiced in England as it was elsewhere during the Middle Ages. Peters observes that it was officially rejected as a tool of the state in 1166 (Peters, *Torture*, 59). It did, however, come back into use in King’s Council proceedings by the early sixteenth century and perhaps even as early as the mid-fifteenth century. On this point see Kelly, “The Right to Remain Silent,” 992–1026, 1007, n. 72, and “English Kings and the Fear of Sorcery,” 206–383, esp. 210 (n. 10), 212–13, 231, 233–37.

14. Barnie, *War in Medieval English Society*, 70.

15. *Ibid.*, 75.

16. Lowe, *Imagining Peace*, 11. See Ben Lowe’s justification in his introduction for the use of the modern term *pacifist*, which he generally uses instead of the cumbersome but more accurate term, *pre-pacifist*. Many of Lowe’s readings of the literary sources must be used with caution (he tends to treat Chaucer’s fictional explorations, for instance, as unmediated statements); nonetheless, he illuminates an important discourse. John Gower’s “In Praise of Peace” is an especially important source; see *The English Works*, vol. 2.

17. Allmand, ed., *Society at War*, 37. In their edition of *English Wycliffite Sermons*, Anne Hudson and Pamela Gradon summarize Wycliffite opposition to the Despensers’ Crusade and provide a helpful list of those sermons that inveigh against war; see vol. 4, 146–51 and 159–60. Hudson discusses Wycliffite opposition to war in *The Premature Reformation*, 358, 367–70, 389, 509.

18. Allmand, ed., *Society at War*, 38.

19. Philippe de Mezières, *Letter to King Richard II*, 44.

20. *Ibid.* Philippe’s emphasis on *Christian* blood reveals the limits of his antiviolent sentiments. His solution to the problem of an excess of energy among the fighting men of England and France is to send them off to the Holy Land to battle the infidels. The name he

proposes for the new chivalric order thus formed is the Order of the Passion, which reveals the multivalent symbolism of Christ's Passion and the often contradictory uses of this symbol in society. For discussion of Philippe, see Michael Hanly, "Literature and Dissent in the Court of Charles VI."

21. Hoccleve, *Hoccleve's Works*, 192, 188, 192. Hoccleve's devotional works include a Marian lament based on Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de la Vie Humaine* (Hoccleve, "Lamentacioun of the Grene Tree"). For an extended consideration of this lament in relation to Hoccleve's life, the complaint mode, and the construction of interiority, see Bryan, "Hoccleve, the Virgin, and the Politics of Complaint."

22. As Robbins has observed, "oral treason" was punishable by death in this period; using poetry as their medium and cloaking the subject matter in poetic images was one way that authors could "manage to ask significant questions under the very nose—might one say noose?—of the Establishment" ("Dissent in Middle English Literature," 41–42). Robbins presents a model of deliberate subterfuge; I remain agnostic on the question of whether the articulation of a dissenting ethic in the laments was part of a deliberate and self-conscious strategy.

23. The rubric appears on f. 35a, in a later, humanist script, above "De arte lacrimandi" (ed. Garrett) in London, British Library MS Harley 2274. For similar uses of the "woman's voice" in medieval literature, see Klinck and Rasmussen, eds., *Medieval Woman's Song*, and Dunn and Jones, eds., *Embodied Voices*. More generally, the function of prosopopoeia here merits consideration in the context of concepts of embodied mind; see Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, and Johnson, *The Body in the Mind*.

24. The phrase is Nussbaum's, cited in turn from Proust, who calls emotions "geological upheavals of thought." My analysis of the intellectual, and more specifically the ethical, content of emotional rhetoric is aligned with Nussbaum's: "If emotions are suffused with intelligence and discernment, and if they contain in themselves an awareness of value or importance, they cannot, for example, easily be sidelined in accounts of ethical judgment, as so often they have been in the history of philosophy" (*Upheavals of Thought*, 1).

25. This amplification runs parallel to the development of the Virgin's swoon in the visual arts. On the swoon and the related topoi of the compassion of the Virgin, the "second birthing" at the crucifixion, and the doctrine of *co-redemptio*, see Neff, "The Pain of *Compassio*." Neff subsumes the Virgin's *compassio* into an exegetical framework, but it seems to me that at least some of the images she adduces—particularly those featuring a heavily pregnant, "grotesque" Marian body—are (and were, in the medieval period) open to interpretation outside that frame.

26. For the *Stabat mater*, see Raby, *A History of Christian-Latin Poetry*, 440. An important exception to this tradition of third-person narration is the *Quis dabit*, also known as the *Lamentation to St. Bernard*. A Middle English version of this text will be discussed later.

27. Brown, *English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century*, 1.

28. *Ibid.*, 87.

29. See Brown's introduction to *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century* for a discussion of the increased prominence of this type of lyric in the fifteenth century. Most of the thirty-five laments described by George Taylor in "The English *Planctus Mariae*" (605–37) date from the fifteenth century. My discussion of the laments in this chapter is based on those described by Taylor, those edited by Brown, and those listed in the appendix to Keiser, "The Middle English *Planctus Mariae*," 188–89.

30. Woolf, *English Religious Lyric*, 248, 262, 259. Subsequent parenthetical citations refer to this book.

31. Gray, *Themes and Images*, 137.

32. Marx, "The Middle English Verse 'Lamentation of Mary to Saint Bernard' and the 'Quis dabit,'" 139.

33. Keiser, "The Middle English *Planctus Mariae*," 183.

34. *Ibid.*, 175.

35. Ibid., 183. On this point Keiser cites J. A. W. Bennett, who writes, “The Easter Liturgy, familiar in the Middle Ages to every child, lies behind every poem here considered” (*Poetry of the Passion*, 60). This is certainly true on one level. As scripted, however, the laments hold this knowledge of the Resurrection in abeyance.

36. The Greek tradition of lament-as-protest has been the most amply documented. Andromache’s anticipatory lament for Hector, in which she begs him to refrain from going into battle (“you have no pity on your little son, nor on me, ill-starred, who soon must be your widow” [Homer, *The Iliad* 6:407–8]) has its historical counterpart in public laments by women in ancient Athens—laments whose subversive force was perceived to be such a threat to the morale of soldiers in the Athenian state that legislation was introduced to ban all public lamenting by women; see Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices*. In its various eddies from antiquity through the Byzantine era and on to the present day, the Greek woman’s lament has continued to carry this subversive potential: see Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*; Caraveli, “The Bitter Wounding”; and Seremetakis, *The Last Word*. The literature on woman’s lament in other cultural contexts is extensive; see, for example, Davidson, “Women’s Lamentations as Protest in the Sha’hna’ma”; Bourke, “More in Anger Than in Sorrow: Irish Women’s Lament Poetry”; and Grima, *The Performance of Emotion Among Paxtun Women*.

37. On the emergence of this form, see Reed, *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution*. Reed observes that unlike texts that can be termed doctrinal dialogues, such as Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, which “involve an exchange between a naive persona and an authority with obvious claims to moral superiority,” Middle English debate poems usually honor two opposing views, values, or concepts of truth; moreover, they “often seem less interested in settling on a winner than in the apprehension or appreciation (in the multiple sense of the word) of the differences that give rise to the debate”—a feature Reed calls the “aesthetics of irresolution” (*Middle English Debate Poetry*, 3, 2).

38. The framework of innocence and guilt continues to operate in many late laments of the Virgin in Latin, however; in a text printed in the early sixteenth century, for instance, the Virgin complains thus: “Ordo juris vertitur, / Aequitas turbatur / Justitia laeditur / ratio mutatur / Sine causa filius / meus morti datur” (Dreves, *Analecta hymnica* 10:79).

39. Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century*, 12.

40. Horstmann, “Lamentacion of Oure Lady,” 456.

41. “Christ’s Burial,” in Baker et al., eds., *Late Medieval Religious Plays*, 141. I cite this play in the context of affective meditations because it may have been used in private devotion. In the manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS e Museo 160), it is called “a treyte or meditatione off the buryalle of Criste & mowenyng therat.” This generic conflation is discussed in Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, 293–300.

42. Baker, *Late Medieval Religious Plays*, 160.

43. Alternative constructions of motherhood were certainly in circulation in late medieval England; see esp., on “maternal martyrdom” and the benefits said to accrue to mothers who renounced their children, Newman, “Cruel Corage: Child Sacrifice and the Maternal Martyr in Hagiography and Romance,” Chap. 3 in *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 76–107. The essays collected in Parsons and Wheeler, *Medieval Mothering*, provide a sense of the variety of maternities in medieval Europe, including that of the “medieval mother as a careless aristocrat who callously rejects her children, sending them into fosterage, monastic life, and warfare” (ix–xvii; ix). On the concept of mothers as “war wombs,” see Cooper et al., eds., *Arms and the Woman*.

44. Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century*, 146.

45. Garrett, ed., “De arte lacrimandi,” 276.

46. Furnivall, ed., *Political, Religious, and Love Poems*, 205.

47. For examples of the lullaby poems and those that depict Mary in the pose of the pietà, see Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century*, 1–8, 13–18.

48. Keiser, "The Middle English *Planctus Mariae*," 170.
49. Ibid.
50. Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century*, 85.
51. Ibid., 13.
52. Ibid., 9.
53. Hoccleve, "Lamentacioun of the Grene Tree," xxxix.
54. Garrett, "De arte lacrimandi," 282.
55. Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century*, 19.
56. Ibid., 146.
57. Hoccleve, "Lamentacioun of the Grene Tree," xxxix.
58. Garrett, "De arte lacrimandi," 282.
59. de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion*, xv.
60. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 1.
61. I model this phrase on language used by Sara Ruddick, to whose work in feminist philosophy my thinking about the laments is much indebted. Ruddick adopts the language of cost from the early twentieth-century peace activists Olive Schreiner and Jane Addams. In Schreiner's view, a mother "knows the history of human flesh; she knows its cost." Addams, while recognizing in her own cultural moment that "there are many, many women who believe that War is inevitable and righteous, and that the highest possible service is being performed by their sons who go into the Army," there is nonetheless "a curious revolt [that] comes out again and again, even in the women who are most patriotic ... a certain protest, a certain plaint against the whole situation." She ultimately frames the matter in terms of cost, comparing a mother to "an artist who is in the artillery corps, let us say, and is commanded to fire upon a wonderful thing, say St. Mark's at Venice, or the Duomo at Florence, or any other great architectural and beautiful thing. I am sure that he would have just a little more compunction than the man who had never given himself to creating beauty and did not know the cost of it" (as quoted in Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 185–86).
62. Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century*, 19.
63. Horstmann, ed., "St. Mary's Lamentation to St. Bernard," 277. The Middle English *welth* can mean "wealth" or "well-being"; both senses appear to be conflated here.
64. Baker et al., *Late Medieval Religious Plays*, 159.
65. Horstmann, "Lamentacion of Oure Lady," 455.
66. Ibid., 455.
67. Hoccleve, "Lamentacioun of the Grene Tree," xli.
68. Ibid., xlv.
69. Ibid.
70. Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century*, 81, 19; Horstmann, "Lamentacion of Oure Lady," 500.
71. Horstmann, "Lamentacion of Oure Lady," 454.
72. Ibid., 454, 455, 456.
73. *MED*, *fode*. Since blood and milk were believed to be expressions of the same bodily fluid, the Virgin is insisting on the recognition of the bond of blood she shares with her son. On the medieval understanding of mother's milk as blood, see Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, and Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*.
74. Hoccleve, "Lamentacioun of the Grene Tree," xlii.
75. Horstmann, "St. Mary's Lamentation to St. Bernard," 279.
76. Horstmann, "Lamentacion of Oure Lady," 457.
77. Garrett, "De arte lacrimandi," 278.
78. Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century*, 67. This image may also be an allusion to Christ's own description of his homelessness: "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20; Luke 9:58).
79. Furnivall and Horstmann, *Minor Poems of the Vernon Manuscript*, 613. Subsequent parenthetical citations refer to this edition.

80. Hoccleve, "Lamentacioun of the Grene Tree," xliii.
81. Furnivall and Horstmann, *Minor Poems of the Vernon Manuscript*, 614.
82. Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century*, 60.
83. Hoccleve, "Lamentacioun of the Grene Tree," xxxix.
84. Knuuttila provides a very useful survey in *Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*; see esp. Chap. 4, "Emotions in Fourteenth-Century Philosophy," 256–86. The hierarchical organization of the soul, with the "concupiscible" universally ranked at the bottom, served to reinforce the dominant belief that particular affections must be suppressed in the service of a higher good.
85. Brown, *English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century*, 90.
86. Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century*, 82.
87. For cross-cultural analogues, see, in addition to sources cited in n. 36, Waller and Rycenga, eds., *Frontline Feminisms*; Lorentzen and Turpin, eds., *The Women and War Reader*; Goldstein, *War and Gender*; Elshtain, *Women and War*; and esp. Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* and the sources drawn upon by Ruddick.
88. See the essays collected in Saunders et al., *Writing War*, as well as the standard histories of England for this period. Rubin, for instance, observes that the war with France "represented opportunity and fostered an ethos of service" until its end in 1453 (*The Hollow Crown*, 268).
89. Furnivall and Horstmann, *Minor Poems of the Vernon Manuscript*, 625.
90. Horstmann, "Lamentacion of Oure Lady," 459.
91. Horstmann, "St. Mary's Lamentation to St. Bernard," 282.
92. Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century*, 15.
93. *Ibid.*, 13.
94. *Ibid.*
95. *Ibid.*, 15.
96. The phrase "sisterhood in pain" is used by Anna Caraveli to describe the "sense of communal victimization inflicted by either social or natural forces (for example, the death of children)" among women in rural Greece ("The Bitter Wounding," 181–82). Caraveli observed that men experienced similar feelings of pain but expressed these feelings in solitude. One elderly man, for instance, "described several occasions on which he was alone, when he would burst into lamentation as the only appropriate vehicle for venting his feelings" (179).
97. Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century*, 16.
98. *Ibid.*, 17.
99. *Ibid.*
100. *Ibid.*
101. I follow a long tradition in using the term *chanson d'aventure* to refer to this genre, but it should be noted that the term is purely a product of English literary criticism; medieval authors did not use the term, and it is not French in origin.
102. Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century*, 70.
103. Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century*, 2–3. Subsequent parenthetical citations refer to this edition.

CHAPTER 6. KYNDENESSE AND RESISTANCE IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH PASSION LYRIC

1. Miller, *A Fifteenth-Century Record of English Choir Repertory*, 240.
2. *Ibid.*, 240–41. The short version recorded in Ritson also appears in Oxford, Bodleian MS Ashmole 176, f. 100r.
3. For descriptions of the manuscript, see James, *Western Manuscripts of Trinity College* (where the volume is designated as number 1157), and L. Mooney, *Index of Middle English Prose*. The pen-trials of "Robert Ramstovn" on f. 59v have suggested a likely association with the Romston family in Essex (Mooney, 104). The identification of the manuscript as a

layman's commonplace book—rather than a general household miscellany—is my own, based on its contents. It is not impossible that the manuscript was available for general use by the women as well as men of the family, but it is certainly a male-centered volume. Contents, in English and Latin, seem to be included for the interest they hold for men, especially the male head of the household. These include drinking songs in Latin (e.g., f. 1r); recipes for sick horses, sheep, and greyhounds (f. 1v, f. 58v, f. 63r); a poem of advice on purchasing land (f. 24r); a dicing poem with illustrations (f. 41r); a form of indenture for an apprentice (f. 30r); notes on the capture of foreign ships during the siege of Brest (f. 48v); a conduct poem known as “Aristotle’s ABC” advising its reader to be a “mesurable mane” (f. 69v); a tract attributed to Chrysostom on the ills wrought by women; a poem on the seven ages of man (f. 66v); some accounts, now erased (f. 26v); a letter from a student requesting that his father send him books (f. 45v); a Latin quatrain on baldness (f. 66v); and texts demonstrating strong interests in English politics and history.

4. Cambridge, Trinity College MS O.2.53, f. 55v.

5. *Ibid.*, f. 56r. *MED bourne* 1a: “A watercourse of any size; spring, stream, brook, river.” The unvarying repetition of refrains is a common feature of Middle English lyrics and often considered to be the defining feature of dance songs (as in “Maiden in the more lay”; Dronke, *Medieval Lyric*, 195) and of the carol (Greene, *The Early English Carols*). Here, however, I believe that this convention is being exploited to comic effect.

6. “Come over the burne” is set within this tradition in Woolf, *English Religious Lyric*, 195–96; Gray, *Themes and Images*, 57–58 (where it is aligned with other sacred parodies in which “of course there is no sense of burlesque”); Wenzel, *Preachers*, 241–42.

7. Lawton, “Dullness and the Fifteenth Century.” Important recent correctives to the notion of the “dullness” of fifteenth-century literature include Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, and the plentiful work on the drama, esp. Beckwith, *Signifying God*.

8. See esp. Woolf, *English Religious Lyric*, 183–238. Woolf also observes a distinct change in the tone and style of the Passion lyric as genre between ca. 1475 and 1525.

9. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Middle Ages*.

10. Woolf, *English Religious Lyric*, 5.

11. Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 90.

12. I adopt the term *vulnerabilities* from Bernard, *The King’s Reformation; traditional* from Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*.

13. Brown, *English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century*, 122–23.

14. Reddy defines *emotives* as “first-person, present tense emotion claims” that potentially but not always function as performatives; they are “similar to performatives (and differ from constatives) in that emotives do things to the world. Emotives are themselves instruments for directly changing, building, hiding, intensifying emotions, instruments that may be more or less successful” (*The Navigation of Feeling*, 104–5).

15. The most recent edition of this lyric is in Rolle, *Uncollected Prose and Verse*, ed. Hanna, 32. “Always the most controversial of Rolle’s works have been his lyrics,” Hanna observes (xii); as Hanna notes, “My trewest tresowre” is not as securely situated in the Rolle canon as some of the other lyrics.

16. Rolle, *Prose and Verse*, ed. Ogilvie-Thomson, 55–56.

17. Brown, *English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century*, 128.

18. *Ibid.*, 62–63.

19. Sedgwick introduces the concept of the peripperformative in *Touching Feeling*, esp. Chap. 2. “Peripperformative utterances aren’t just about performatives in a referential sense: they cluster around them, they are near them or next to them or crowding against them; they are in the neighborhood of the performative” (68).

20. Brook, *The Harley Lyrics*, 54.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 55.

23. Carruthers, “Sweetness.”

24. Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century*, 86.
25. Ibid., 93. Although this lyric appears in a manuscript containing lyrics confidently ascribed to Rolle (Cambridge University Library MS Dd.v.64), it is very far stylistically from Rolle's authentic lyrics and is not attributed to Rolle in Hanna's recent edition (see *Uncollected Prose and Verse*, introduction).
26. Gray, *English Medieval Religious Lyrics*, 25.
27. Ibid., 41–42.
28. Ibid., 44.
29. Ibid., 44, 45.
30. See Sedgwick, *Between Men*, on the triangulation of desire.
31. On the early modern prayer closet, see Rambuss, *Closet Devotions*. When considered in relation to the anxieties I discuss here, Richard Rambuss's work suggests how the invention of this architectural feature facilitated a reinvention of feminized, eroticized affect in seventeenth-century devotions as exemplified in the works of John Donne, Richard Crashaw, and George Herbert.
32. The tendency of very late Middle English lyrics to "go long"—Walter Kennedy's poem on the Passion is a prime example—might be interpreted as a response to this problem of duration.
33. On Lambeth 853, see Riddy, "Mother Knows Best"; the characterization of Hh.4.14 is my own.
34. Tschann and Parkes, *Facsimile of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86*, xi; lvii. Tschann and Parkes, who designate the first compiler as Scribe A, deduce from the evidence of various headings, sketches, and additions to the manuscript over time that this scribe was also the first owner of the book. On the evidence of several obits in the manuscript's Kalendar, they tentatively identify him as Richard de Grimhill II (ca. 1263–ca. 1308) (*Facsimile*, lvii).
35. Original and translation from Jeffrey and Levy, *The Anglo-Norman Lyric*, 268–69.
36. Jeffrey and Levy, *The Anglo-Norman Lyric*, 269.
37. Brown, *English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century*, 91–2.
38. See note 3 for a list of representative contents of the Trinity College manuscript. To date, no full paleographical analysis of the Trinity manuscript has been published, though Mooney provides much useful comment on the manuscript's English prose texts in her description (*Index of Middle English Prose*, 104–9). Until such a study is published, I would suggest that the most reasonable hypothesis, based on the manuscript's contents and scribal practices, is that it was compiled and copied chiefly for and by male members of the Ramston family.
39. Evidence of these tendencies in the Trinity manuscript includes a short text on f. 66v, which takes the form of a harsh, unidentified voice chastising the reader for the *unkyndenesse* demonstrated in swearing. It opens with the accusation, "How darest thou swear or be so bold also / To blasfeme hym that is very rote and rynde / and pull his armes his precious body fro / alas what unkendnesse is in thy minde" (f. 66v). The notion that by swearing one participates in committing the violence done to Christ in the Passion is of course conventional in fifteenth-century England. What I wish to point out is that this negative construct affords the reader of the Trinity manuscript a position that does not posit—and thus does not, as a script for affective performance, require—easy, compassionate, eroticized intimacy between the reader and Christ. The lyric actually facilitates an imagined experience of violently pulling Christ's body apart rather than of embracing that body in the way the earlier lyrics of Digby 86 do. The prose text known as "Points Best Pleasing to God," f. 23v, offers another example of the kinds of affective tensions evident in the Trinity manuscript. It brings affective pressure to bear in its insistence that what Christ wants most of all is neither good deeds nor penitential practices but intimate love ("Geve thyne hert to me.... Loue me for me and it shall like me better than thou make a piler rechyng vp to the heven styking full of rasers al thy body to rend there vpon," f. 23v). Yet this text is one that

accommodates or even generates distance between the reader and Christ. It does not offer an answering script, through which the reader might perform *kynde* feelings. Indeed, it virtually shuts down this possibility by framing Christ's impassioned pleas as words heard by "an holy man" (f. 23v). What could be an interactive affective performance between reader and Christ is thus cast as a narrative to be listened to by the lay reader as an edifying story about a holy man.

40. Jaeger, *Ennobling Love*.

41. Galloway, "From *Gratitudo* to 'Kyndenesse,'" 365.

42. Ibid., 373. See also, in relation to how Langland employs the concept, Zeeman, "The Condition of *Kynde*."

43. MED, *kinde*, 4a.

44. See examples under MED *unkinde*, adj., 2a, and *unkyndli*, adj., 2a.

45. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 311–12; see esp. Chap. 11, "Intellectual Change: Men, Beasts, and 'Nature,'" 303–32. See also the extensive discussion of Natura as goddess in Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 51–137.

46. Boswell refines his own thesis somewhat in his subsequent study, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, where he proposes that it is in the fourteenth rather than the thirteenth century that censure of homosexuality became especially intense: "From the fourteenth century on, Western Europe was gripped by a rabid and obsessive negative preoccupation with homosexuality as the most horrible of sins" (262).

47. Michael Calabrese and Eric Eliason have argued that the poet praises heterosexual union in such rhapsodic terms in order to condemn homosexual union all the more; see "The Rhetorics of Sexual Pleasure and Intolerance in the Middle English *Cleanness*."

48. Andrew and Waldron, *Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 128.

49. "Friends joined together and embraced in order to endure their sad fate and to die together. Love looks to love, and takes his leave, so as to end everything at once, and to part forever" (trans. Calabrese and Eliason, "Rhetorics," 253). Calabrese and Eliason interpret these lines as exhibiting "astonishing empathy to human suffering" (252). To them, this passage thus presents a puzzling "gap" between the poet's feelings about homosexuality and those expressed by God: "Where God found sexual perversity, the poet portrays human dignity. The poet evidently sees something positive about antediluvian society that escapes God" (253). But as I read it, there is no gap: these lines ultimately prove as intolerant as the rest of the poem. Recognizing love and depicting it with sensitivity is not the same as accepting its moral validity. Dante's portrayal of the love of Paolo and Francesca provides a useful parallel, though Dante's swoon marks his sympathy as poet in a way never manifested by the poet of *Cleanness*. I would argue that the author of *Cleanness* demonstrates a larger tendency in medieval culture to see feelings as acts and thus as open to moral scrutiny and censure as other acts. For a more extended reading of the sexual and affective structures of the poem, see E. Keiser, *Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia*, 165–93. Keiser argues—persuasively, in my view—that the author of *Cleanness* avoids incorporating the image of Christ the suffering lover into the poem because this image carried such strong potential to trigger homoerotic affections.

50. Galloway not only supplies abundant evidence for the designation of ingratitude as "unnatural" in late medieval England but also describes the disciplinary procedures by which this ethic was inculcated, especially among boys. "By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries," he writes, "many a schoolboy was having cudged into him verses on 'ingratitude' found in the *Liber Floreti*, as circulated separately or within the popular *Auctores Octo*, which includes phrases such as these: 'Non sis ingratus Domino si vis fore gratus ... / Dicitur ingratus benefactori male gratus / Obliviscendo, non reddendo, ve nocendo' [Be not ungrateful to God if you wish to be graced.... / he is called 'ingrate' who is improperly grateful to a benefactor, / by forgetting or by not rendering in return or by harming]" ("From *Gratitudo* to *Kyndenesse*," 370).

51. Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 14.

52. Woolf, *English Religious Lyric*, 207.

53. The most obvious and widespread evidence of this belief that emotions could and should be controlled is the fact that the Seven Deadly Sins are emotions.

54. Throughout her discussion of fifteenth-century Passion lyrics, Woolf describes their themes as “potentially moving” but concludes at virtually every turn that this potential is not fulfilled; see esp. *English Religious Lyric*, 214–15.

55. Gray, *English Medieval Religious Lyric*, 42, 44.

56. Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century*, 88. For other versions of this kind, deriving from the Latin penitential type, “Homo vide quid pro te patior,” see Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century*, 93, and *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century*, 158. Grimestone’s manuscript, Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland Advocates Library 18.7.21, appears to me to be a transitional compilation, containing both the simpler, unproblematic scripts for loving “suede Jesu” and other lyrics that elicit feelings of resistance not fully explicable solely in penitential terms.

57. Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century*, 151.

58. The scholarship on the history of the amorous gaze is too extensive to list here; for a concise discussion of amorous looking in a range of late medieval literary texts, see Burrow, *Gestures and Looks*, esp. 92–99. Richard Trexler, writing in 1990, could observe that “few scholars have raised the problem of the male gazing sensually at the male form” (“Gendering Jesus Crucified,” 116), but this observation about the scholarship is no longer true; work in the field of early modern art history has been especially rich.

59. Woolf, *English Religious Lyric*, 215.

60. Gray, *Themes and Images*, provides an overview of these kinds. The fifteenth-century devotional manuscript, London, British Library Additional 37049, contains virtually all these lyric types; for a rich interpretation of the lyrics of MS 37049 in the context of the manuscript as a whole and with respect to the performance of devotional reading more generally, see Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*. On lyrics in the charter of Christ tradition, see Steiner, “Lyric, Genre, and the Material Text,” in *Documentary Culture and the Making of Medieval English Literature*, 47–90; on the name of Jesus, see Renevey, “The Name Poured Out.”

61. For an example of Christ addressing the meditator as brother and friend, see the lyric beginning “Brother, abyde,” in Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century*, 169–75. This lyric type is rare. It seems to me that this scarcity is due to the fact that the roles of brother and friend skirt the illicit, at least where grown men are concerned in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Age seems to make a key difference during this period. *Brother* is often used to refer to Christ in lyrics on the Nativity, in which—even when the Passion is foreshadowed—Christ can safely be imagined as an infant and no sexualized affection applies (as in Richard Hill’s manuscript, discussed later in the chapter). Bray’s study, *The Friend*, further suggests that the fifteenth century was a problematic period in this regard. Although Bray offers rich evidence of intimate friendship and sworn brotherhood between men in England in the medieval and early modern periods, I find it significant that his evidence comes from the fourteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries; fifteenth-century evidence is virtually absent. Bray does not explain or even note this lacuna.

62. Renevey makes an observation on a monogram in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson C. 285, that supports my view that lyrics in this tradition could function as forms of covert iconoclasm. In this monogram, the name of Jesus is flanked by the names “maria” and “iohannes”; the names thus substitute for representations of the bodies of Jesus, Mary, and John in scenes of the crucifixion. “As a substitute for this powerful visual sign,” Renevey notes, “the Name obliterates somewhat the suffering humanity of Jesus which the cross suggests” (“The Name Poured Out,” 137).

63. I use the term *orthodox* here for the sake of simplicity; there was a spectrum of orthodox-heterodox beliefs, and recent work in Lollard studies has been especially assiduous in illuminating the “grey areas” between orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

64. While the vitality of the Passion plays in late medieval England might appear to counter this claim, in that they were supported so vigorously by lay men through the urban guilds, it could be that these plays, too, represent a deflection from devotional intimacy—not necessarily a reflection and extension of it, as has been assumed. Lyric appeals from the cross, set in the context of a public Passion play, could shift the burden of compassionate response to a collectivity, alleviating the pressure on any particular *anima*.

65. See Simpson, “The Energies of John Lydgate,” in *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, 34–67, esp. 67: “Earlier in this chapter I took various critics to task for investing Lydgate with a powerful periodic representativeness. I am conscious that I have done precisely that myself.”

66. Woolf, *English Religious Lyric*, 237–38. Woolf does not lay the blame for these “less agreeable” characteristics at Lydgate’s feet: “It is much more likely that it is the disruption of the meditative tradition that we feel in Lydgate’s work, rather than any defect in him as a writer” (238).

67. Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 265.

68. *Ibid.*

69. *Ibid.*, 266–67.

70. *Ibid.*, 266. For a close and richly contextualized reading of Pecham’s hymn, see Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire*, 225–40.

71. *Ibid.*, 266.

72. For the full text, see Lydgate, *Minor Poems*, vol. 1, 221–34.

73. See Pearsall, *John Lydgate: A Bio-Bibliography*.

74. See Lydgate, *The Life of Our Lady*, ed. Lauritis et al.

75. Alice Chaucer commissioned the *Virtues of the Mass*; a few poems, including a love poem to the Virgin, were written for the queen mother Katherine, Henry VI’s widow (Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 163–4).

76. Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 169.

77. See, for instance, the collection of essays edited by Scanlon and Simpson, *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture, and Lancastrian England*.

78. See esp. Strohm, *England’s Empty Throne*.

79. On the critique of Richard II as “effeminate,” see John Bowers, ““Beautiful as Troilus.””

80. Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 114.

81. *Ibid.*, 114.

82. *Ibid.*, 113.

83. A full facsimile of the manuscript is available online at <http://image.ox.ac.uk/show?collection=balliol&manuscript=ms354>. A complete list of contents is provided in Dyboski, *Songs, Carols, and Other Miscellaneous Poems: From the Balliol MS 354*. Hill’s ownership of the volume is attested on f. 176r: “Iste liber pertineth Rycardo Hill seruant to M. Wynger alderman of London.” Studies treating this manuscript include Boffey, ““Loke on this wrytyng, man,”” and Collier, “Richard Hill—A London Compiler.” Collier questions Duffy’s assertion that Hill was “untouched by ... reforming currents” in ways that resonate with the covert iconoclasm I find in the manuscript’s lyrics; see esp. Collier, “Richard Hill,” 328–29.

84. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 76.

85. *Ibid.*, 77, 76.

86. Hill clearly had access to a wide range of texts, including religious lyrics. The Balliol catalogue suggests that he copied many of the Nativity carols from preexisting collections. Living in London, with the means and education to obtain a variety of texts for copying, he would have been able to find Passion lyrics if he had wished to find them; the absence of such lyrics can probably be taken as lack of interest rather than lack of access.

87. Dyboski, *Songs, Carols*, 34.

88. *Ibid.*, 35.

89. *Ibid.*

90. *Ibid.*, 103.

91. Even the editor of Hill’s manuscript places it under the heading of “Ballads and

Worldly Songs” rather than “Sacred Songs and Carols” (Dyboski, *Songs, Carols*, 103).



The following abbreviations appear in the bibliography.

- CCM** *Corpus christianorum: continuatio mediaevalis* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1966–).
EETS English Text Society
EETS ES English Text Society, Extra Series
MED *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–).
MGH *Monumenta Germaniae historica*. (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1826–)
J.P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus: series latina*, 221 vols. (Paris: Migne, 1861–64).

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